WEST

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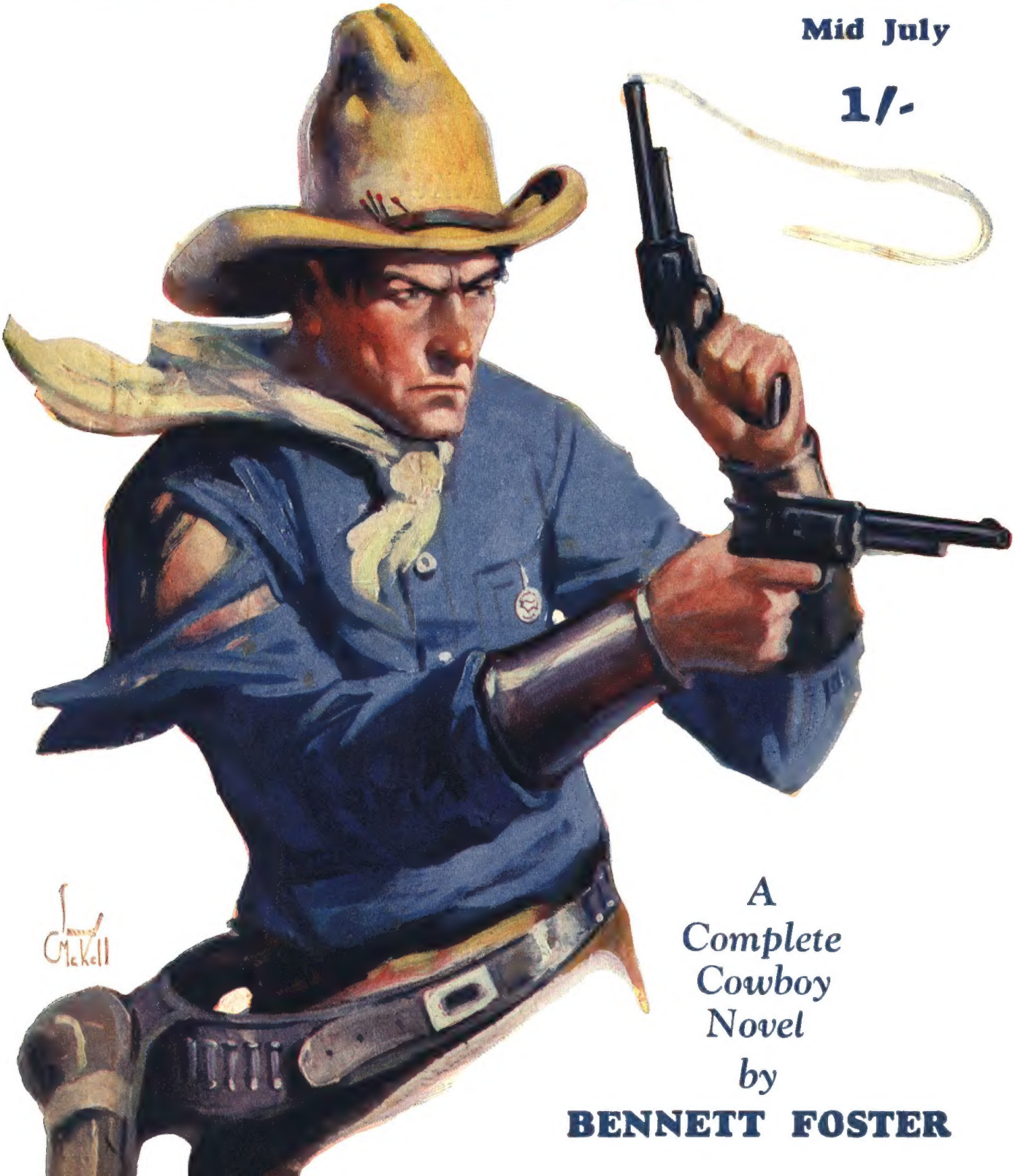

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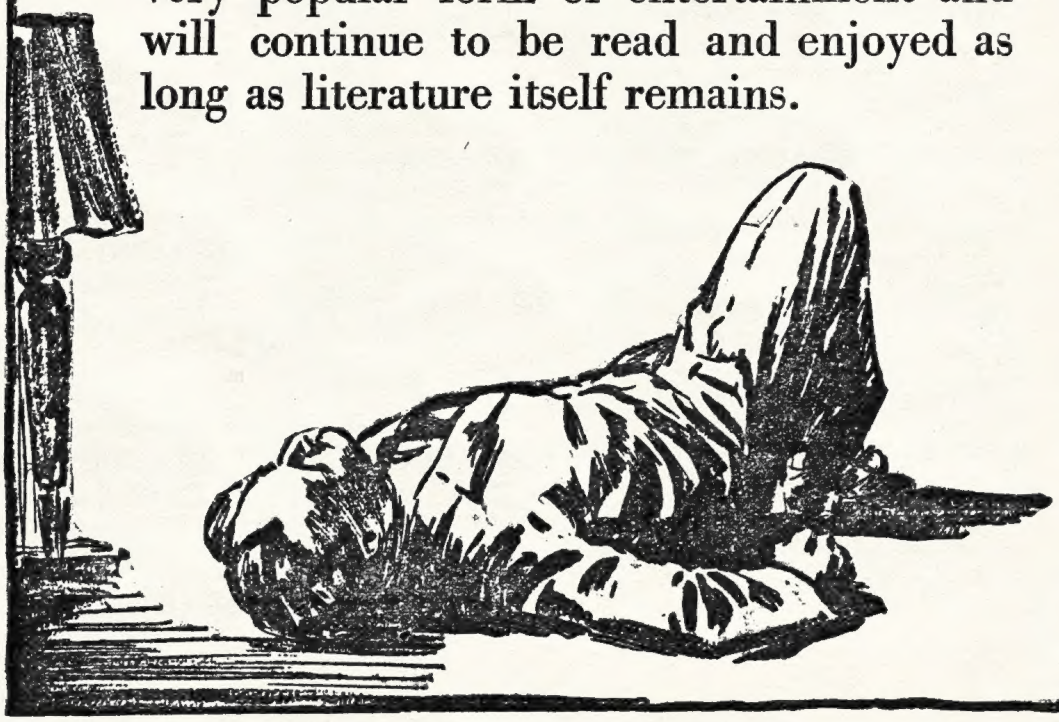

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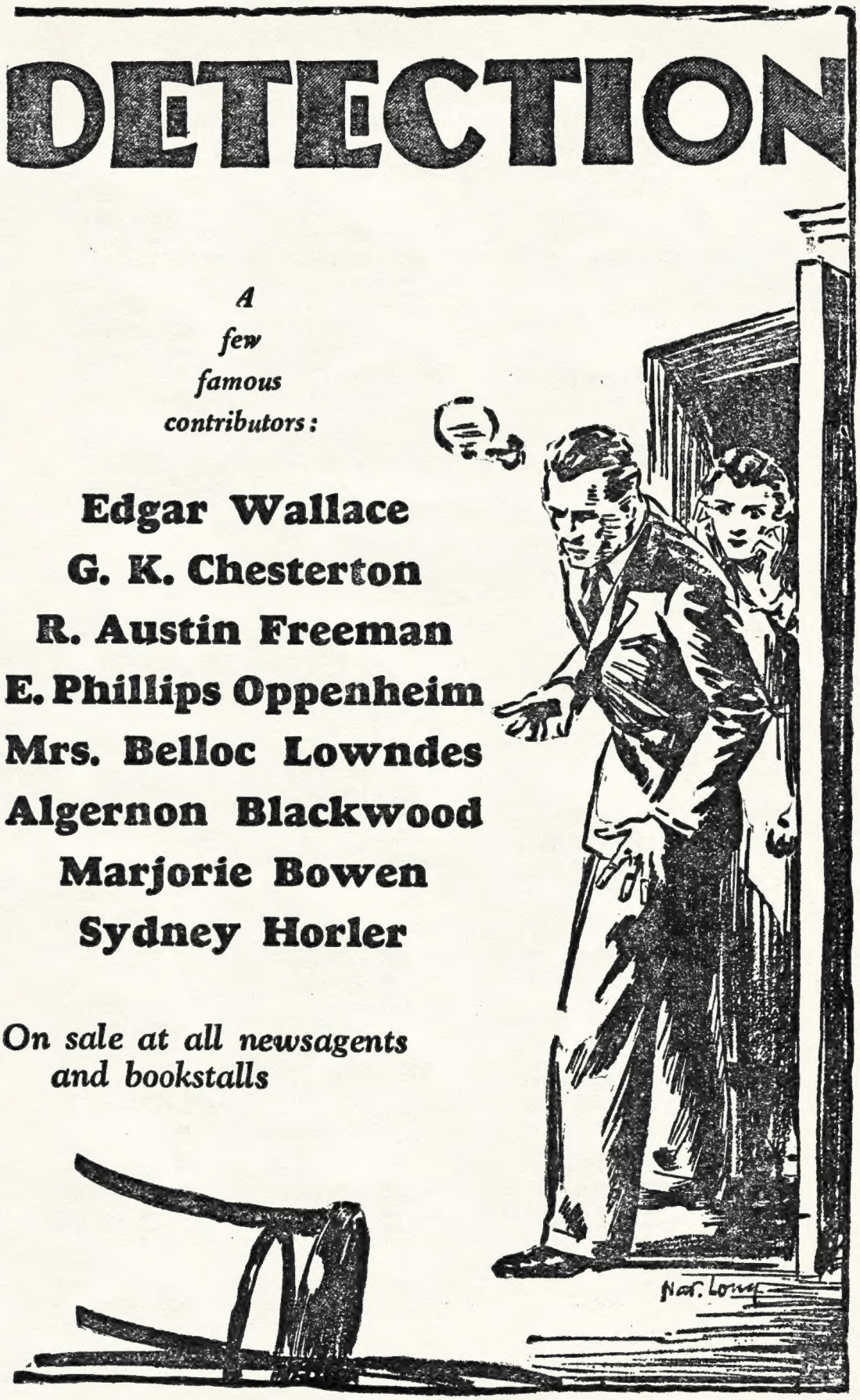

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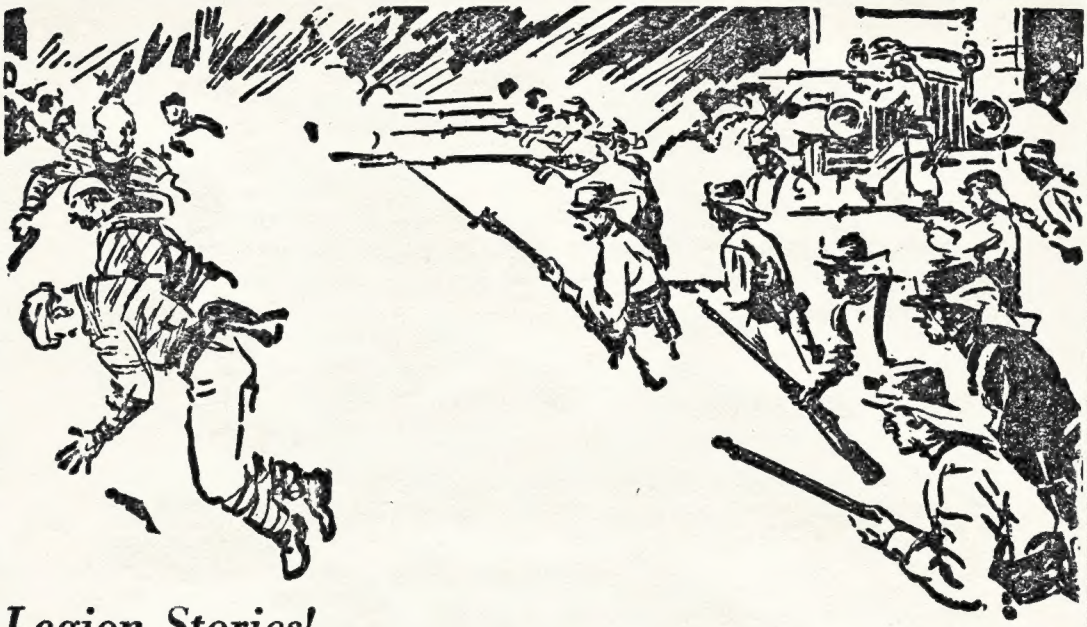

Legion Stories!

THE FOREIGN LEGION

do not mention these decorations because I am proud of them. But it should be obvious that I must have been in the French Foreign Legion a few years in order to earn them. Such facts are recorded against me as Legionaire No. 1384, and can always be verified.

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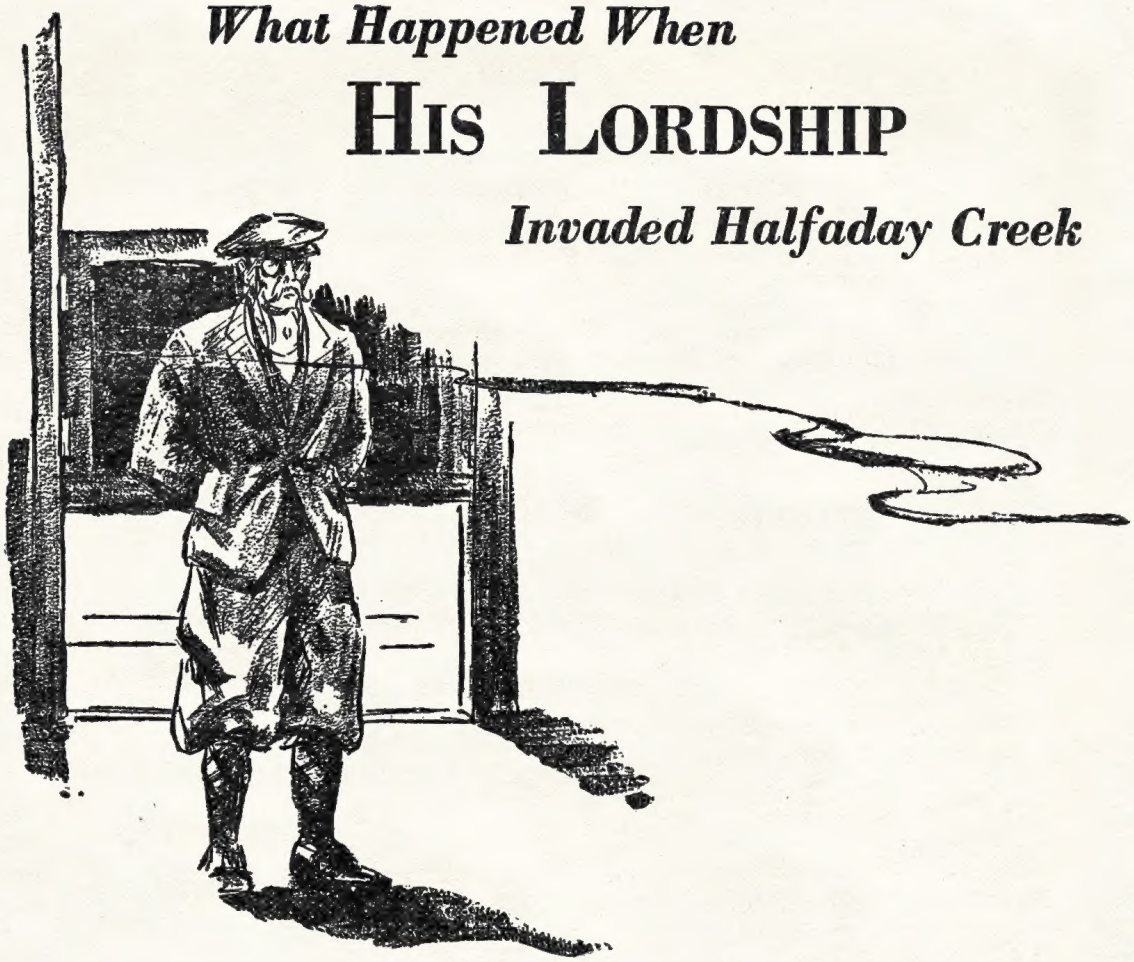
THE FOREIGN LEGION

What Happened When
His Lordship
Invaded Halfaday Creek



I

BLACK JOHN SMITH edged over to make room for Corporal Downey of the Northwest Mounted Police to join the little group of sourdoughs that stood at the Tivoli Bar in Dawson.

"What you doin' down here?" asked the officer, as he poured a drink from a bottle shoved toward him by Old Bettles. "An' how's everything on Halfaday?"

"Well, I claim Halfaday's the moralest crick in the Yukon. An' as fer me bein' here, it's my belief that every onct in so often, a man ort to expose himself to the broadenin' influence of travel—even when he don't have to."

The sourdoughs grinned, for of all the men who comprised the little community of outlaws that had formed on Halfaday Creek, close against the Alaska-Yukon border, Black John was the most notorious, it being his open boast that he had at one time held up and robbed a major and three common soldiers of an army payroll amounting to some forty thousand dollars. Nevertheless, his slate was clean on the Yukon side, and as no request for his arrest had ever come from the American authorities, he not only came and went as he pleased, but maintained the profound respect of the sourdoughs, and of the Mounted Police as well. For it was common knowledge in the gold country that Black John, ably assisted by Old Cush, the trader, managed between them to keep Halfaday Creek practically free from crime.

Old Bettles, dean of the sourdoughs, cackled tipsily, "Wisht I could git along as easy as what you do. You've always got plenty of dust on you. Where in hell do you git it?"

"Who—me?" grinned Black John. "Why, I've got a couple of claims."

Camillo Bill laughed. "Yeah—but no one ever seen you work 'em. Accordin'

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

Author of
"Ethics on Halfaday,"
"The Patriots,"
etc.

to what we hear, you don't do nothin' but hang around Cush's saloon."

"Well—that's a chore, of itself. Me an' Cush shakes fer the drinks, an' keeps an eye on the crick. Then there's that payroll money of mine. Take it first an' last, it's draw'd a lot of interest."

"Interest!" grinned Moosehide Charlie. "How in hell could it draw interest? There ain't no bank on Halfaday!"

"Every crick," grinned Black John, "has got two banks. An' it's been my experience that every cache draws a hell of a lot of interest. That's why you've got to keep 'em so well hid."

"The drinks is on me," laughed Moose-

hide. "I shore took that one—hook, line, an' sinker. Had any hangin's up there, lately?"

"None to speak of," replied Black John. "Mebbe a newcomer, now an' then. The reg'lar residenters avoids it, if possible. Seems like, lately, every time we git ready to pull us off a hangin', Downey, here, pops up an' takes our culprit off our hands. Of course, legal hangin's is preferable, when practical—but they ain't so sure as a hangin' by miners' meetin'. An' besides, a good share of the boys, fer one reason an' another, don't deem it advisable to come clean down here to Dawson to take it in—an' the lesson is practically lost on 'em. Hearin' about a hangin' ain't got the good old moral effect like seein' him danglin' right there in front of yer nose from a rafter er a tree, knowin' what he done—an' figgerin' the next one might be you. Hell, some of them parishioners Downey has purloined off'n us was took clean down to the provinces to be hung. It's hard enough to keep Halfaday moral without havin' our lessons stole."

CORPORAL DOWNEY joined in the laugh. "There's another bird that's goin' to be sent back to the provinces to be hung, if I can lay hands on him," he said. "We got a tip that he might be showin' up in the Yukon. He murdered a widow woman down in Manitoba, after torturin' her till she told where her money was."

"There's a lot of widders," opined Black John, "both grass, an' sod. But there's ondoubtless many of 'em that hadn't ort to be murdered—an' practically none should be tortured. Off hand, I'd say the case savored of criminal intent. Was the enterprise successful, in the way of remuneration?"

"The chances are that it was," answered Downey. "It seems that the woman lived alone in a small house on the outskirts of Winnipeg. Her husband had been a big farmer in Manitoba, an' when he died, she sold off all the land, an' draw'd all the money he had in the bank an' bought this little house an' moved into it. Bein' distrustful of banks, she kep' all this money in one of these here little black dispatch boxes. It was common knowledge that she had it in the house. An' one mornin', after the neighbors hadn't seen her fer a couple of days, they broke into the house an' found her tied up in a chair. Her feet had been burnt with a candle, an' she'd been choked to death, an' the dispatch box laid on the floor with the cover open. There was nothin' in it but a will, leavin' all her money fer to build a home fer homeless cats."

"It hadn't ought to take no hell of a lot of money to build a house fer a cat," ventured Black John.

"Near as they can figure, in checkin' up with the bank, there should have been right around a hundred thousan' dollars. This woman was English, an' she'd changed it all into Bank of England notes."

"They're good property," approved Black John. "But cripes! There ain't enough cats in the world to build a hundred thousan' dollar house to hold 'em! An' besides, who gives a damn about a stray cat, when there's plenty of kids that ain't got no home? Look what that money would of done fer a lot of homeless kids."

"That's right," agreed Downey. "But this woman was evidently more interested in cats."

"Her husban' prob'ly done the smart thing when he died," retorted Black John. "Torturin' an' murderin' a woman like her should be at least a misdemeanor, I s'pose. But I can't seem to work up no grief over the theft—the loss fallin' as it does on a gang of stray cats."

"It was a damn brutal murder," said Downey, "no matter what we might think of the woman."

"Oh shore," admitted Black John. "The widder-killin' habit hadn't ought to be condoned, because, if persisted in, it would ondoubtless lead to the knockin' off of some good ones. The law of averages would take care of that. But how come

they know'd who done it, an' which way he was headin'?"

"The investigation was handled by the Winnipeg police. They got finger prints off the dispatch box that checked up with the prints of a bird that done time in Stony Mountain for one robbery, an' is suspected of plenty more. Hawkins, his name is. He's an Englishman, an' pretty clever. He put in a good many years workin' as valet, or butler or somethin', for some of these lords or dukes over in England. He's got 'em down pat. The job they picked him up on was one where he was posin' as a lord tourin' through Canada. He'd faked up credentials an' was entertained an' wined an' dined clean through to Winnipeg where he seen the chance he was lookin' for, an' cleaned up on a banker. They knocked him off for that job, an' back in Ontario an' Quebec they scratched several robberies off the books, where servants had be'n suspected, in houses where this bird had been stayin'. Bein' as his line was so different, the police was surprised to find him mixed up in a murder until this banker, when they questioned him, recollected that he'd told about this woman as an illustration of the foolish hoardin' of money. It was at a dinner party he give for this fake lord—not figgerin', of course, that any of his guests would slip over an' knock her off."

"Yeah," agreed Black John. "However, you ain't told us yet, why them Winnipeg police thinks this here Hawkins might be headin' fer the Yukon."

"I didn't say they thought he was. We got the circular about him, that's all. They ain't picked him up yet, an' there's a hell of a lot of folks pilin' into the Yukon, so they want us to be on the watch."

"What you goin' to do, Downey," chuckled Black John, "declare an open season fer lords?"

Downey laughed. "It kind of puts us on the spot, at that. We're s'posed to show these titled men every consideration —an' we like to, too; nine out of every ten of 'em are damn fine fellows. An' now we'll have to show 'em consideration an' at the same time suspect 'em of murderin' old women. How you goin' to do that?"

"I ain't a-goin' to do it," grinned Black John. "That's the advantage of not bein' a policeman. If this here Lord Hawkins shows up on Halfaday, he'll be on the same footin' as any other newcomer. An' bein' as there ain't no widders on the crick, we'll feel reasonably safe. We're open minded, up there—not bein' bound to neither suspect, nor respect him."

II

I JEST happened to think," said Black John, as he stepped into Cushing's saloon one morning a month after his return to Halfaday, "I learnt a new game down to Dawson."

"Yeah?" said Old Cush, picking up the bottle he had set out, and returning it to the back bar. "Who you goin' to play it on?"

"Why—me an' you'll play it. It'll relieve the monotony of shakin' dice."

"Not fer no stakes, we won't."

"No—jest fer the drinks."

"Drinks is stakes."

"But this is a square game, Cush. Hell —you don't think I'd cheat you, do you?"

"Nope."

"Shore—you know damn well I wouldn't."

"Listen," said the somber faced proprietor of Cushing's Fort, "If you was to borrow every ounce I've got, an' be gone fer a month, I wouldn't worry fer a damn minute about not gittin' it back. An' if I was to go away fer a month an' leave every ounce I've got in the safe, knowin' that you know'd the combination, I'd know that every ounce would be there when I got back. But shakin' dice fer the drinks, I wouldn't even look down to spit whilst you had the box. An' likewise, I don't play no new game with you."

"But a man couldn't cheat in this game."

"No?"

"Shore he couldn't. It's jest bettin' on what a fly will do."

Cush pondered the proposition. "Well," he said, "there ain't but damn few things he could do—an' they're all ornery. Look at that mirror!"

"They call it 'fly loo,'" exclaimed Black John, producing two white cubes from his pocket. "I'd fergot all about it till this mornin' I was kind of reddin' up the shack, an' these here sugar lumps dropped out of the pocket of my good shirt when I hung it up. I slipped a handful of 'em

out of the sugar bowl down to the Gem Restaurant after I'd learnt the game. It's like this—you take one lump, an' I take the other, an' we set 'em on the bar. An' the one which a fly lights on, er crawls up on his lump first, has got to buy the drinks. An' if anyone makes any noise, er any motion that would scare a fly which is about to light on his lump, he buys the drinks. If them simple rules is lived up to, there ain't no chanct to cheat. It struck me as a game that would fit in good with your mentality."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. An' besides, when the flies is as thick as they be, a man gits plenty of action."

"Well," said Cush, "I don't mind takin' you on fer a round er two. It seems kind of silly, though, fer grow'd up men to be doin'."

"It's surprisin' how excitin' it gits. Take it, when a fly crawls around clost to both lumps. They hardly ever light right on a lump. They light on the bar clost by, an' then walk over to 'em, an' first they'll go right up to one, an' you'll think shore as hell he's goin' to climb up on it, an he'll turn around an' walk to the other lump, an' mebbe he'll do that way five, six times before he finally climbs up on one. When there's half a dozen er so playin' it's more excitin'."

"If yer plumb shore yer heart'll stand the strain, we'll begin," replied Cush dryly. "Is there any advantage in the choice of lumps?"

"No—take yer pick, an' we'll set 'em there on the bar."

PICKING up one of the two cubes, Old Cush reached onto the back bar and, extracting a pencil from between the pages of his day book, made a small black mark on one of the faces of his lump. "Jest in case of a misonderstandin' as to which is which," he said, "the one with the mark is mine."

The two cubes were placed some six inches apart on the bar, and drawing back from them, the men waited in silence, watching with interest the flight of sundry flies that circled about. Presently one alighted midway between the two lumps, paused for a moment to wipe at his face with his fore feet, and then began an uncertain course that took him to within half an inch of Cush's lump as the two men looked on intently. Ignoring the cube, he walked erratically about the bar, and in the course of his perigrination came to Black John's lump, against which he reared, standing with his hind feet on the bar.

"There!" exclaimed Cush. "The drinks is on you! He touched your lump first."

"Touchin' ain't climbin' on," reminded Black John. "It don't count onless he's up on the lump—clear of the bar. That's the rule, an' I stated it plain. If you'd kep' yer mouth shet an' hadn't hollered an' scairt him off, he prob'ly would have climbed on up. Now we got to wait fer another. There's one! Shut up now an' watch him."

This fly, like the other, rambled about,

threatening now this lump, now that, until he finally crawled onto Black John's cube.

"I s'pose," remarked Old Cush sarcastically, "that there's some rule that pervents you from buyin' a drink now, eh?"

"Not when I'm beat," retorted Black John. "There ain't no dispute about the fly bein' on my lump. An' that makes a horse on me——"

"There wasn't nothin' said about horses," protested Cush. "What I claim —one fly's as good as a hundred!"

"Not in this game, it ain't," countered Black John. "Down to Dawson they always play horses. Jest the same as dice is always shook on horses, onless stipulations is made to the contrary. Why—if we didn't play horses, it would be goin' contrary to the custom of the country! Keep still now—there comes another fly!"

Two flies came. One alighted directly upon Cush's lump, and another crawled up beside him.

"There you be, two horses to onct!" cried Black John. "The drinks is on you. That's the beauty of this game—the onexpected is always apt to happen. At that though, it ought to be a rule that when a fly lights direckly out of the air on a lump, the drinks should be double. It don't hardly ever happen. But you kin see, Cush, there can't no one cheat in this game."

"Huh!" grunted Cush, as he set out bottle and glasses. "It's a hell of a game. But drink up an' I'll go you another. That damn fly lit on my lump worked like a decoy. An' that black mark I put on might act like one, too. I'm goin' to turn it on the bottom, so they can't see it."

Luck ran adversely, and Cush lost two more rounds of drinks, while at no time was there more than one horse on Black John. "I got to quit fer a bit," announced that worthy, "an' go stick some more wood in my stove. I'm bilin' up a washin' of clothes. I'll be back direckly an' we'll go at it agin. It's kind of fun, ain't it?"

"Huh. Jest shows a man's a damn fool that'll bet on a fly."

TWENTY minutes later Black John again entered the door. "Good thing I quit an' went home when I did," he announced. "My b'iler was leakin', an' them clothes was damn near dry. Little more'n they'd been burnt to a cinder. I plugged the hole with some string an' filled her up again. Well—you lookin' fer revenge?"

"All right," replied Cush indifferently. "I s'pose we might's well be doin' that's anything else. Tell you what I'll do—you claimed that it ought to count double if a fly lights right out of the air on a man's lump. I'll go you that way. I got to do somethin' to git even."

"All right," agreed Black John. "You're the loser—pick yer lump."

"I'll keep the same one," said Cush. "I don't want no law of averages workin' agin me."

The cubes were set, and after a moment of waiting a fly circled above the bar and alighted squarely upon Black John's cube.

"Horse on you," announced Cush. "Be still—here comes another!"

That fly also settled directly upon Black John's lump, as did the next, and the next, and the next, until six flies alighted directly from the air onto that same cube.

"Hold on!" exclaimed Black John, reaching for his cube. "What the hell's comin' off, here?"

"That's three rounds on you," announced Cush, "an' each round is double. It was yer own proposition. What the hell you lookin' at?"

"I thought," said Black John, turning the cube over and over in his fingers and examining each face, "that mebbe you'd draw'd a picture of a fly on this here lump, bein' as you mentioned them decoys."

"Hell—no! I wouldn't do nothin' like that, John!" exclaimed Cush. "It's prob'ly what you might call one of these here now—quincidents."

"It's a damn funny one," said the big man, a note of suspicion in his voice. "The flies hardly ever done that down to Dawson."

"Mebbe," suggested Cush, "we got some other kind of flies up here."

"Hell—a fly's a fly, no matter where he's at! Give me a seegar, an' I'll go you another."

THE sugar was replaced on the bar, and even as Black John held the match to the cigar, a fly hovered for a moment, and settled upon his lump.

"Horse on you," proclaimed Cush, as the other hurled the match to the floor, and began to sniff audibly at his finger and thumb. The next moment he reached for the sugar lump which he had just been handling, and subjected it to a similar sniffing. Then he glared across the bar.

"Where's that chunk of limberger cheese I fetched up to you from Dawson?" he demanded.

"It's here on a shelft in under the bar," replied Cush. "I've ett most of it. There ain't much left. Would you like a piece?"

"I wouldn't eat the damn stinkin' stuff! But there was enough of it left so you rubbed my chunk of sugar on it! I know'd it as soon as I got a whiff of my fingers! I been cheated!"

"No, you ain't," retorted Old Cush. "You told me yerself, an' repeated it two, three times—that this here was a game where there couldn't be no cheatin'. You named off the rules, an' there wasn't nothin' said agin limberger. I reached down, whilst you was gone, fer to git me a slice of it, an' I seen how there was a lot of flies had lit on it, so I jest tried a little experiment. Next time you fetch up a new game from Dawson, John, you better learn all the rules. Someone's liable to take advantage of you."

"You go to hell!" grinned Black John, and then turned suddenly to stare at the figure that had darkened the doorway. It was the figure of a large man, clad in a loose fitting jacket of rough tweed, full, baggy, knee-length trousers of the same material, heavy gaudily striped stockings, sport shoes, and a flattish cap that matched the suit. A heavy blond mustache concealed the lips, drooped almost to the chin, and curved upward against the cheeks. He stared vacuously into the room through a monocle, from which dangled a heavy black ribbon. He spoke no word. Merely stood there—staring.

Black John was the first to speak. "Step up an' have a drink," he invited. "This here's Lyme Cushing behind the bar, an' my name's Smith—Black John, to be exact."

"Aw?" said the figure, without altering his vacuous expression.

An awkward silence followed, which Black John strove to relieve. "Yeah," he said. "Er—damn if we ain't."

"Aw?" The monocle popped from the man's eye, and jiggled about on the end of the ribbon, as he turned to address someone behind him. "Fetch the luggage, Breen," he said, and advanced to the bar.

"Broke yer specs, eh?" observed Black John, eyeing the monocle. "Well, Cush kin prob'ly fix you up with an old pair of his. If you go tryin' to git along with one glass, you're liable to git cock-eyed er somethin'. What you goin' to have? We've got whiskey—under four different names."

"Aw—I say," said the man, glancing owlishly from one to the other.

"You do, eh?" encouraged Black John. "Well—throw a shot of licker into you, an' mebbe you kin say it faster." He pushed the bottle toward the man, who filled his glass, and waited for the others to fill theirs. "Here's mud in yer eye!"

"Aw," said the man, leaning over the bar, and peering solicitously into the fly-specked mirror. "Which eye?"

Black John grinned: "Jest another way of sayin', 'Here's how,' er 'Here's lookin' at you'—er whatever they say where you come from. Drink up an' have another. A man can't walk on one leg."

THE man's glance shifted immediately from the mirror to his legs which he regarded with owlish solemnity. Then, seeing the others waiting glass in hand,

he raised his own and swallowed the liquor. Choking, and rasping the dregs from his throat, he regarded the two through watering eyes:

"Atrocious whiskey!" he managed to gasp.

"Yeah, we like it, too," replied Black John. "Have another."

"Ugh. You'll excuse me. Really. Doubtless because I'm accustomed to—er

—other brands, don't you know. After Breen has fetched the luggage, I'll awsk you gentlemen to drink with me."

"Shore," agreed Black John. "We'll take a chanct. It can't do us no more harm than what ourn done you. Meanwhile, if no handy alias occurs to you, jest reach in the name-can yonder an' help yerself."

Popping the monocle into his eye, the man gravely regarded the tin molasses can that stood at the end of the bar. "I don't quite see," he said, glancing from one to the other.

"A man wouldn't with his glasses broke. Loan him yourn, Cush, so he kin see the name-can. If you've got the other piece, mebbe we kin solder 'em, er glue 'em together fer you."

"I—er—fail to grawsp the idea of the tin."

"Oh—the name-can. The idea is fairly simple, bein' merely that when anyone comes to Halfaday which he ain't nimble witted enough to think up no alias except John Smith, we invite him to reach in an' grab himself a name which thereupon becomes his'n as long as he sojourns amongst us."

"Extraordinary!"

"Extraordinary—hell! It's unique!"

"Yes, yes—quite so. My name is Creechy-Montrose. I am——"

"God!" interrupted Black John. "That's the best one that's been sprung on us yet! We can't offer nothin' like that in the name-can."

"My mother was a Montrose, from Devon. And my father is Sir James Creechy, Lord Severn, and Earl of Nevers and Bilks."

"Oh—I git you! You didn't need to mention his whole string of aliases. We don't go far into a man's past on Halfaday. Jest so he minds his own business an' don't commit no indiscression, like murder, or larceny, or claim-jumpin' or skullduggery while on the crick, we don't give a damn what his own name was last week, let alone his pa's. A man might even tie up a widder woman an' burn her feet with candles till she told him where her money was, an' then rob her an' murder her—an' it would be all right with us, providin' it was done before he come to Halfaday. It would be a fatal *faux pas,* though, if he was to indulge in the same *peccadillo* after he got here."

"Extraordinary!"

"But true. Why—if the men that's been hung from that very rafter onder which yer standin' was laid end to end, they'd pave hell a mile!"

"Aw?" The man popped the monocle into his eye, and surveyed the rafter above his head with interest. "And do you hang them—right in here?"

"Only part of 'em. The bulk of 'em is hung to trees."

"But—er—what about the police?"

"Oh, we work right hand in glove with 'em. We take a lot of crime off their hands."

"Remarkable!"

"Stupendous!" grinned Black John, and turned to stare, wide-eyed, at the array of luggage that the man, Breen, had deposited just inside the doorway. "Cripes!" he exclaimed. "Is all them satchels yourn? Er is there more of you comin'?"

"My luggage. There should be one or

two more pieces, and after Breen has fetched them, we'll have a drink. A good whiskey and soda will set us all up, I am sure."

"Shore," agreed Black John. "But we like our sody better in pancakes. We'll take our whiskey straight, if it's jest the same to you."

BREEN added two more leather bags to the array, and fitting his monocle, the man called to him from the bar. "Breen, fix us a drink."

"Very good, sir. What will it be, sir?" He carried one of the heavier pieces, a rectangular leather case to a card table, and proceeded to open it.

"These gentlemen prefer theirs neat. I'll take mine with soda—and rawther stiff, Breen, rawther stiff."

"Hell's bells!" cried Black John, who had stepped over to the table. "Come over here, Cush! He's got a reg'lar bar! Bottles an' glasses, all fitted in—an' a lot of spoons an' dinguses fer mixin' fancy drinks! Damndest outfit I ever seen!"

The man, Breen, turned to Cush, who had come out from behind the bar. "May I have some ice?"

"Ice!" exclaimed Cush. "Where the hell would you git ice in the summer time?"

"Some likes it in their drinks," explained Black John, and turned to Breen. "You can't git no ice around here in the summer, buddy. But, if you've got any of them bottles you want to cool off, jest take 'em down an' sink 'em in the crick fer a while. They'll git ice cold in half an hour. In the meanwhile, we might work on that licker."

The man turned an inquiring glance on his employer. "What does your lordship say?"

"Do as the gentleman suggests. And before you go, you might open a bottle of Scotch and set it yonder on the bar."

"Very good, sir."

Black John grinned, and winked at the monocled one. "How does he know it's good, Lordship? He must have been nickin' at it."

"What?"

"Oh—nothin'. I was jest kiddin'." Black John turned to Breen, who was depositing a bottle and some glasses upon the bar. "Hey—never mind them fancy glasses, they might git broke. I see Lordship here has got his initials carved in 'em, er somethin'. We'll use Cush's. It would be a shame to waste them others."

Breen hesitated. "What does his lordship say?"

"Do as the gentleman suggests."

When Breen had departed with several bottles in his hands, the three lined up at the bar, and Black John picked up the bottle and sniffed at its contents. "Smells kind of funny, but it mightn't be so bad, at that," he pronounced.

"It's a very good brand," ventured the Englishman. "Won't you gentlemen sample it? I think I'll have one neat."

They drank, and Black John smacked his lips. "Tastes kind of funny—like it had smoke in it, er somethin'. I s'pose a man could git used to it, though. I don't give a damn how licker tastes, jest so it takes a holt when it gits down." He paused and grinned. "What you gaggin' fer, Lordship? Hell, that licker slides down nice an' smooth!"

"I—er—I'm accustomed to havin' somethin' to—er follow it when I take it neat, don't you know."

"Shore, so are we. Fill her up agin." He pushed the bottle toward the man, who, still rasping his throat, refilled his glass. The process was repeated several times, and with each drink his lordship seemed to have less and less trouble with his throat. When the bottle was nearly empty, a man entered the room, and Black John motioned him to the bar. "Come over here, John. Me an' Cush wants you to meet a friend of ourn." The Englishman popped the monocle into his eye and surveyed the newcomer. "Lordship," said Black John, with tipsy pomposity, "this here is One Armed John Smith, so called.

He kin find more corpses than any two men on the crick."

"Aw?"

"Yer damn whistlin'! An', John, this here is my old friend, Screechy Rosemont. His hired man nicknamed him, Lordship —so we call him that, too. An' that reminds me, he ort to be showin' up with them other bottles. This one's damn near gone!" Stepping to the door he called loudly, "Breen, damn yer hide—you fetch them bottles in here! What the hell you tryin' to do—freeze 'em?"

As Old Cush set a fourth glass onto the bar, Black John shoved the bottle toward the Englishman. "Fill her up agin, Screechy, old socks," he advised, "an' we'll kill this bottle, an' make room fer them others."

When Breen entered with the bottles, Black John ordered him to set them on the bar. The man hesitated and glanced toward his employer.

"What does his lordship say?"

"Do as the gentleman suggests, Breen."

THE man complied, and backing away, stood at stiff attention, his eyes on the opposite wall. Black John called to Cush, "Lock the door, Cush, an' we'll declare a moratorium! Five of us is plenty in here, with what licker we've got. There's some fancy bottles left in that satchel, with green stuff in 'em, an' yellar—that's got furrign names onto 'em. There ain't no call to let no one else in on the party. Chances is, they wouldn't appreciate this high-toned licker no how."

When Old Cush had resumed his place behind the bar, after locking the doors, Black John's roving glance fell upon Breen, standing stiff as a statue a few paces away. "Hey, you!" he called. "Come on! Belly up, here."

The man stood, his face rigidly to the fore, looking down his nose.

"Set out another glass, an' knock the neck off another one of them bottles, Cush!" ordered Black John. "An' you there—Screechy—shove over an' make room fer Breen! Don't try to hog the whole bar! Come on, Breen, shove in here!"

The Englishman fitted the monocle to his eye with a bit less dexterity than was his wont, and surveyed the immobile Breen. The blond mustache quivered, and the monocle popped from his eye.

"Haw, haw, haw!" he roared, thumping the bar with his fist. "Haw, haw, haw, haw! Breen—do as the gentleman suggests!"

III

HOURS later, as the Englishman was endeavoring to demonstrate to Black John the intricacies of the Highland Fling, Breen bespoke Old Cush, who was trying to play Nearer My God to Thee on a wheezy accordion that had been pledged for drinks by some transient visitor.

"I must look to his lordship's accommodations," he said. "He is bound for Dawson, but being a great sportsman, he heard at a place called White Horse, that game was getting scarce about Dawson, but that good shooting might be had up here in the way of bears and moose. His lordship has hunted in India and Africa, and he wants to have a try at your grizzlies and moose, so he employed some Indians as guides and came up."

"Where be they?" asked Cush, giving the accordion a kick that sent it the length of the room. "That damn contraption couldn't make good music, if it was new!"

"They refused to conduct us past this point. When we arrived here, they demanded their pay and returned in their canoes."

"They done right," approved Cush. "They know damn well we don't want no strangers on Halfaday till we've looked 'em over. How long does he figger on stayin'?"

"He thought that two or three weeks should be sufficient. Could he kill some

bears and moose within two or three weeks?"

"'Cordin' to if he kin hit 'em er not. He won't have to go fer to run onto plenty. What you want is an empty shack."

"Yes, we have a small tent, but a shack or a cabin of some sort would be preferable."

"What's the argument?" roared Black John, as he and the Englishman unsteadily approached the bar. "Lordship has been tryin' to show me a new dance, but

he claims he's got one too many feet, an' it didn't go so good. Fill 'em up all around, Cush! I need a shot of reg'lar licker to kill the taste of that damn green stuff! Cripes, I'd as soon drink paregoric!"

"But," interrupted the Englishman, endeavoring unsuccessfully to fit the monocle to his eye, "my dear Smith, I warned you that absinthe was not meant to be drunk neat, by the glawsful—nor the bitters, nor vermouth, nor benedictine. They're for mixin', don't you know."

"They're mixed by now! Hell, Lordship—drinkin' 'em straight, the way we done, look at the time we've saved! It ain't supper time yet, an' we're drunker'n hell!"

"That's right," agreed Cush, "an' my stummick feels turrible. I wisht I hadn't took that last green one."

"Throw some licker in on top of it, an' it'll be all right," advised Black John. "What's good fer the hair won't never bite, er some such sayin'—seems like there ort to be a dog in it somewheres, but he prob'ly got out."

"These folks is huntin' a shack," said Cush. "Accordin' to Bean, here——"

"Breen—not Bean," corrected the Englishman.

"One name's as good as another, on Halfaday," said Cush. "He claims that Lordship wants to lay him in some meat ——"

"No, no," the Englishman interrupted, "not meat! It's the sport, don't you know. I've heard of your moose and grizzlies, and I'd like to bag some."

"Well, anyhow," continued Cush, disgustedly, "they want a shack fer two, three weeks."

"Shore," said Black John. "It's lucky fer you, Lordship, that we hung One Eyed John a while back. You kin move yer stuff into his shack. It's only a little piece from here, an' you'll be handy to the saloon. It's a good shack, too."

"Where will I find a guide?"

"Well—I'll guide you, myself! I ain't so damn busy, right now. An' if it's moose an' bear you want, I'll show you plenty."

"Aw, I say—that's rippin'!"

BLACK JOHN'S hand flew to the seat of his trousers. "It's these damn pants I got off'n Cush. They was so rotten they ripped the first day I pulled 'em on, an' I've sewed 'em up twict sence."

"Pants?" The Englishman fumbled uncertainly with his monocle as he blinkingly regarded the other's breeches. "I—I fail to grawsp the allusion."

"Me, too," admitted Black John, exploring with his fingers. "You must be cockeyed. Fer onct, they ain't rippin'!"

"Haw, haw, haw!" roared the Englishman, and turned to the others. "Fawncy! He thought I said that his breeches were rippin'—givin' away, you understand, tearin'. What I meant old thing, is that I think it's sportin' of you to offer to guide me—top hole!"

"Oh."

"And you must be an American—you called them pants!"

"Yeah—the old Romans didn't have no name fer 'em, er I'd of mentioned 'em in Latin."

"But I'm glad you're an American, don't you know. They're a great people!"

"Yeah—we give you English an inklin' of it at Bunker Hill."

"But we won the Battle of Bunker Hill, don't you know! In London we have a small brass cannon we captured from you Americans in that battle."

"Yeah," retorted Black John, "but in Massachutsetts we've got the hill."

"How droll!"

"It ain't no droller'n what a brass cannon is—an' a damn sight more useful. But that war was fought quite a while back, an' us Americans is satisfied, havin' got a little chunk of land out of it, so what's the use of fightin' it over. I don't mind proclaimin' that I've got a snootful. My stummick is in a condition of onrest, owin' ondoubtless to the injudicious use of them strange drinks. If there's any more of 'em left, let's git at it an' finish 'em. A man's got to do what he sets out to do."

"There ain't a damn thing left but them spoons, an' fancy glasses, an' a kind of a tin can with a lid to it," announced One Armed John, inspecting the case.

"Shut up the satchel then, Breen," ordered Black John, "an' we'll all turn in an' give you a lift packin' that stuff down to One Eyed John's shack. An' then I'm goin' to hit the hay. This drunk didn't turn out joyous. My stummick is churnin' around like I'd swallered a whirlpool. An' some turrible tastes keeps comin' in my mouth. A man might better stick to his own kind of drinks. Give me another shot of that licker, Cush—er I'll be losin' what I've got."

Old Cush unlocked the door, and Black John picked up a large portmanteau, of which Breen hastily relieved him.

"His lordship's personal belongings," said the man. "I'll look after this one, nyself."

"Give me a couple of them others, then. I've got to have two fer balance, er I'll never git there. Come on, boys, grab up what you kin pack. Damned if I've seen so much stuff lugged around the country sence I used to git up early to watch the circus unload."

IV

BLACK JOHN crossed the floor and stood before the bar, shortly after Old Cush had opened up the following morning.

"Give me a drink," he demanded, as the somber faced proprietor regarded him with jaundiced eye.

"Have you et?"

"Et! I don't never expect to eat. If I kin git a couple of drinks to stick, mebbe I'll live through the day. Believe me, them English is a hardy race—to keep on livin', what with the stuff they drink! That licker of Lordship's would tear the flues out of a steamboat!"

"Mebbe it's like he said," ventured Cush, "bein' intended fer mixin', an' not to be drunk all to onct."

"Oh, hell! Stuff like that, it's better to git it over an' done with. I'll feel safer, knowin' there ain't none of it left on the crick. Give me a can of tomatoes, an' the opener, an' a big glass. That drink stuck, an' I feel like I could take nourishment."

"Barrin' not havin' much sense, an' bein' kind of funny lookin', Lordship ain't a bad guy," opined Old Cush. "Them nobilities was prob'ly raised different from what we was."

"Yeah—but as an appraiser of human nature, you wouldn't even make a good deck hand. Not only Lordship ain't no nobility, but he commits larceny, an' he's addicted to the widder-killin' habit to boot."

"The which?"

"He ties widder women up in chairs, an' burns their feet with candles till they tell him where their money's cached, then he robs 'em, an' chokes 'em to death."

"Well," replied Cush, "there ain't no

widders on Halfaday. But how do you know? Did he tell you?"

"No, that ain't a trick even a duke would brag about. He done a widder thataway, down in Manitoba. Downey told me about it, in Dawson. Of course, she was a cataleptic. But even——"

"A what? Oh—you mean, she had fits?"

"Hell, no! She liked cats. I fergot that scientifical names is plumb wasted on you. This here woman had left all her money fer to build a home fer stray cats. They found her will, which was about all Lordship left, when he skipped out."

"He prob'ly didn't git much, if she left it all to build a house fer cats."

"About a hundred thousan' dollars, in Bank of England notes—accordin' to Downey."

"H-u-u-m—a hundred thousan'," speculated Cush. "An' he might be carryin' it around in one of them satchels."

"He might, at that," opined Black John, recollecting the haste with which Breen had relieved him of the large portmanteau.

"It might be in that big valise. Do you suppose Bean is in on it?"

"Cripes—no! Accordin' to Downey, it was a one-man job. An' he wouldn't be fool enough to let anyone in on it—'specially not no menial like Breen. What he prob'ly done was to tell him he'd knock hell out of him, er somethin', if anything happened to that piece. Them lords an' folks like that is snooty as the devil about their belongin's."

"Thought you said he wasn't no nobility."

"He ain't—but Breen don't know it. He prob'ly picked Breen up in Vancouver, er somewheres, an' bein' rigged up like these here pictures of lords in magazines, Breen took him fer the real thing. But hell, I spotted him in a minute! He overdone the job, piled it on too thick, jest like an actor in a drayma, overplayin' his part."

"We ain't goin' to pull off no more draymas!" interrupted Old Cush. "I git scairt every time I think of one. Twict, now, you've pulled one off—an' each time, if any little thing had went wrong, I would of been in a hell of a fix!"

"You didn't need to worry. There can't nothin' go wrong in a well-staged drayma," assured Black John. "If it did, it wouldn't be well-staged. But layin' draymas aside, what I meant was that Lordship has got himself rigged up too damn much like a lord to be one. I seen one onct that come to Chicago, an' he didn't look no different than a lawyer, er a banker, er a street car conductor on his day off. It's kind of funny he'd overdo it, too. 'Cause, accordin' to Downey, he used to be a butler er somethin' in England. But any sort of man shouldn't be allowed to profit by a murder."

"That's right, when you come to think about it," agreed Cush. "An' if there wasn't no profit in it, a man wouldn't hardly keep on with his murderin'. We'd be doin' a good deed if we seen to it that a murderer didn't make no profit."

"Shore, we would! But on the other hand, it ain't none of our business what a man done before he come to Halfaday. An' likewise, it wouldn't be ethical if we was to rob this here party, no matter how his money was come by. We're in the awkward position of havin' dooty to do, an' no way of doin' it, without we run contrary to some damn ethic, er other."

"Wouldn't it come under skullduggery," ventured Cush, "if a man was to fetch the proceeds of a crime onto Halfaday?"

"Hell no!" exclaimed John emphatically. "You gone crazy er somethin'? Skullduggery is, what you might say, a flexible offense, but that ain't no sign we should stretch it all out of shape! We've got to keep our laws down to the p'int where a man of ordinary intelligence an' rectitude kin keep from gittin' hung! S'pose we jest let things ride fer the present, an' mebbe somethin'll turn up. I got a hazy recollection of promisin' to guide him on some huntin' trip er other. I was ondoubtless drunk to promise such a

thing, but bein' a man of my word, I'll stick to it. It might be that he'll meet up with some accident er somethin'. Anyway, I'll have the chanct to give the matter thought."

"You want to watch yer step, John," advised Old Cush. "I don't know as it's wise to go off to hell an' gone in the hills with a man like that. S'pose he took a notion to knock you off?"

"By God, he'd change it then! I ain't no widder. I'll admit he's a evil companion, an' as such should be shunned by us better element. But I ain't afraid of him.

Why, take it last night—knowin' like I know'd that he'd tortured a woman an' killed her, it was all I could do to keep from bustin' him one on the nose. The only way I could keep from it was to remember that she was friendly to cats. I'll try to treat him civil, an' at the same time see if I can't figger some way whereby he ain't allowed to profit by his crime."

OLD CUSH was about to reply, when the Englishman entered, closely followed by Breen. "Good mawnin', Smith! Good mawnin', Cush. Jolly party we must have had, lawst night—what?"

"If you look at it that way," replied Black John sourly.

"Haw, haw, haw! Breen complains of a headache. Deuced nuisance it must be—a headache. Never had one. But you look top hole, this mawning, Smith!"

"My looks belies me."

"Will you join me in a peg?"

"A which?"

"A peg—a pick me up!"

"Oh—shore," answered Black John. "I'll try."

The glasses were emptied, and Black John stood for several moments, with tightly pressed lips, staring determinedly at the wall as his throat worked in a swift series of swallows. Presently he faced the Englishman, who beamed upon him through his monocle, as he asked, "Have another?"

"I'm game, if you be. This un's on me. Have you et?"

"Beg pawdon?"

"It ain't necessary. I jest said, 'Have you et?' Have you had yer breakfast yet?"

"Oh, yes indeed. You Americans have a droll way of stating things. At times I am put to it to follow you. I had a jolly breakfast. Breen fried a tin of pickled tripe."

"O-o-h," groaned Black John. "Be careful what you talk about! I'm havin' a hell of a time with that last drink."

"Aw, extraordinary!"

"It will be, if I kin keep it."

"I'm ready to start huntin', whenever you are," announced the Englishman.

"You mean," queried Black John, "that you crave fer to hit out into the hills—today?"

"Why yes. If you are ready. The sooner the better. I'm keen for the sport."

"I'm as good a man as the next one, if I die fer it," murmured Black John. "Wait here till I git my pack sack."

V

EARLY one evening a week later Black John stepped into Cushing's saloon, and took his accustomed place across the bar from the proprietor who had already set out a bottle and two glasses.

Old Cush eyed him somberly, as they poured their liquor. "Any luck?" he asked.

Black John's eyes roved casually about the room and focused for a moment on a table where half a dozen men were play-

ing stud. "Yeah," he answered, "some. Got a moose an' three bear. Lordship kin shoot like hell."

"Must be a miserable chore—guidin' a chechako through the hills," opined Cush. "I'll bet you wisht you'd took Bean along to help with the packin'. You must of had it all to do."

"You lose. Lordship's a good man on the trail, an' he kin out-pack me the best day I ever seen."

"H-u-u-m. Looks like you'd of run onto more than jest the one moose."

"Hell—we run onto a dozen of 'em. Lordship wouldn't shoot no more. Claimed it wouldn't be sportin'. Jest set an' watched 'em through his glass."

"That's funny, fer a chechako. They generally want to kill every damn thing they see. Did he git buck fever on them bears? I'll bet he hunted him a good safe spot before he opened up on 'em."

"You lose agin. He dropped every one of them bears when they was comin' at him head-on. No one of 'em dropped more'n ten rod from him, an' the biggest one knocked him down when he dropped. Buck fever—hell! If it wasn't that he's got all the guts in the world an' is plumb able with a rifle, you'd be drinkin' alone, right now."

"You mean—he saved yer life?"

"It so appeared, from where I lay," replied Black John dryly. "It's like this —me an' Lordship hits the trail of a big bear. An' what I mean, he's big! We foller him acrost two valleys, an' over two divides, an' the second day, I git in a shot when he's crossin' a shallow rapids. It don't knock him down, an' he don't git our wind, an' he takes up a dry gulch that leads back in the hills. There's blood on the rocks at the mouth of this draw, an' I tells Lordship to climb up an' work along the rim an' mebbe git a shot at him from there, an' I'll take the other rim. He vetoes the suggestion on the ground that it ain't sportin', an' comes back with the idee that I go along the rim, an' he'll foller the bear up through the gulch, it bein' narrow, an' so steep sided that nothin' could climb out of it.

"Well, no damn chechako's ever show'd me up yet, but at the same time there's plenty to be said in the way of argument agin follerin' wounded grizzlies up box canyons. I mentioned what I could think of off hand, without I hope revertin' to downright cowardice. But the effect was contrary to what I was strivin' at. The more I'd tell him about what a wounded grizzly could, an' ondoubtless would do, in the way of annihilatin' his pursuers, the more 'splendid,' an' 'rippin,' an' 'sportin,' an' 'top hole' it was. I gathered from his remarks that an Englishman's idee of sport would be to pull lions out of volcanos by the tail an' kick 'em to death.

"It then an' there occurred to me that agreement with his proposal—me on the rim, an' him in the canyon—would solve our problem of not allowin' him to enjoy his ill-gotten gains, in a conclusive an' satisfactory manner—besides furnishin' a sight worth seein' from the rim. But damn it, trailin' an' campin' with him fer four er five days, I'd got to kind of likin' the cuss. The more hell I'd give him in the way of rough trailin' an' wadin' cold cricks an' short eatin'; the more 'rippin,' an' 'top hole' an' 'sportin',' it was. Standin' there in the mouth of that draw, tryin' to decide what to do, I deliberately called to mind how he'd tortured that widder an' strangled her, an' about what desirable property them Bank of England notes would be to own. But jest about the time I was about to tell him his plan seemed like a good one, I rec'lected that that damn woman favored cats anyhow—so what the hell! I could of kicked his pants fer not murderin' some young widder which was fond of children, instead of the cat-lovin' old hag, like he done.

"Anyhow, I didn't have the guts to let the son-of-a-gun foller in there alone, so in we both goes, him clost along one wall an' me the other. It's mostly rock bottom, with scrub growin' here an' there

where dirt had slid in, an' cracks in the rock, an' loose rock of all sizes layin' around. I'm easin' along, none too chipper, from one rock to another, the best I kin hope fer bein' that we ain't in a blind canyon, an' that the bear has found a way out the upper end. The hope is comfortin', but not conclusive—leavin' plenty of room fer worry.

I'M A little ahead, Lordship havin' clumb up on a ten, fifteen-foot rock to see over a patch of scrub that laid ahead of him. There ain't no scrub on my side, an' I peeks around a corner an' sees that the canyon ends in a rock wall, not fifty yards ahead. A movement ketches my eye, an' there, comin' back down the canyon, is the biggest damn bear I ever seen or ever hope to! The bear's mebbe forty yards away when Lordship sees him, too, an' yells a warnin'. The bear hears it an' no more he does than he r'ares up an' lets out the damndest blast of roars, an' growls, an' bellers that anyone ever heard. The next thing I know'd he's back on all fours, an' comin'! It was a hell of a place to be, so I glances around fer a rock, but there ain't none that kin be clumb short of the one Lordship is on. I turns to make a break fer it, when my foot slips down a crack, an' I sprawls on my belly, while my rifle clatters onto the rocks a good six foot ahead of where I kin reach! I'm a goner. But there ain't no use in two of us gittin' mangled, so I yells fer Lordship to stay where he's at on the top of his rock. Then I turns my head an' ketches a good look at that ton of foamin' hell chargin' down on me with intent to do bodily harm. There ain't no comfort in the sight, an' I closes my eyes.

"The next thing I know, the canyon walls roars with a bunch of explosions that come so damn clost together that you can't tell one from another. I opens my eyes, an' I can't see nothin' but the seat of Lordship's pants, him standin' right plumb between me an' that bear an' a-pumpin' lead into him till hell wouldn't have it!

"I've saw damn good men pump shells into a rifle, but never nothin' like that. The next thing I know'd, Lordship set down hard right on my face, an' when we'd got ontangled I felt somethin' warm an' wet shovin' agin my leg. I rolled over, an' damned if it wasn't that grizzly's head, oozin' blood all over my pants—you kin see, here, where it dried on 'em. He was dead as a mackerel, an' the front of his head looked like it had be'n hit with a pile-driver, where them bullets of Lordship's had smashed into it.

"When I set up, Lordship was reloadin'. 'Your bears in this country are tenacious of life,' he says. 'It seemed for a moment as though I might fail to stop the beggar. The lawst shot did it, though—just as he bowled me over.'

" 'Why the hell didn't you jump out of the way?' I says.

" 'I couldn't,' he says, sort of surprised like. 'You were lyin' right in his pawth. You might have been crushed.'

" 'Didn't you hear me yell?' I inquires. 'Why in hell didn't you stay on yer rock? You didn't have one chanct in a thousan' of stoppin' that bear.'

" 'But, old thing,' he says, 'I had no chawnce at all from the rock! An' besides, it wouldn't have be'n sportin'!' Kin you beat it?

"So when we'd found out I didn't have no broken bones, we skun out the bear, an' come home. We're goin' out agin next week. Lordship claims it's more sport than playin' chess."

"Have another drink," invited Cush.

"Jest one, an' then I'm goin' over to the shack an' ketch me some sleep."

"I s'pose," ventured Cush, as they poured their liquor, "that, things breakin' like they done, that little matter of them bank notes we was discussin', is—er——"

"Dead as that bear is!" interrupted Black John. "Them notes stays right where they're at. An' what's more, Lordship could murder all the widders in Manitoba, an' it would be all right with me. Also, I aim to slip him the word not to show up

on the river. Corporal Downey's a good guy all right, but he ain't never stood between me an' a bear!"

VI

IN HIS cabin on the bank of the creek not far from Cushing's Fort, Black John lighted the bracket lamp, seated himself on the edge of his bunk, and proceeded to unlace his pacs. He paused suddenly as someone tapped on the door, and called a gruff invitation to enter. The next moment Breen slipped into the room and closed the door carefully behind him. Black John noted instantly that nothing in the man's movements suggested either servility or the stiff standing at attention of the trained servant.

"Hello," he said. "What's the matter? Has Lordship got the bellyache er somethin'?"

The man grinned and winked. "No, his lordship is quite all right. It is something

else I came to see you about. Something," he hastily added, "that should prove very profitable to both of us."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. You see, it was I who steered his lordship up here—for a very definite purpose. He is a mining engineer, summoned from South Africa by a British syndicate to take over a mining property at Dawson. The deal will involve the turning over of four hundred thousand pounds——"

"You mean," gasped Black John, "that he's got that much on him!"

"Certainly not," replied the man with a smirk, "or he wouldn't be here. This money is to be delivered to him in Dawson on the first day of September. It is now the fourth of August. Bein' fond of hunting, and having heard that your moose and bears furnished excellent sport, he left Vancouver a month earlier than necessary. At White Horse he commissioned me to make inquiry as to where this game could be found. In the course of this inquiry, through the police and others, I learned of Halfaday Creek and something of its inhabitants."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. I see no reason, between friends, to beat about the bush. It seems to be common knowledge that most of you are men who are outlawed, for one reason or another. I even learned that you yourself are—er, suspected—in the matter of an army payroll."

"The suspicion is founded on fact," observed Black John. "Go ahead."

"Upon learning, also that the game was undoubtedly plentiful up here, I saw at once that it would be an ideal place for making certain contacts, and working out the plan I have in mind. So I engaged some natives to fetch us in."

"Yeah? An' this here plan of yourn—was it in regard to that you snuck over to see me?"

"Just so. You see, I know nothing whatever of the outlands. It is very necessary that I work with someone who does know them—the customs of the country and also its geography. For instance, it might be very important that we should leave the country by some other route than the river. This could be done, no doubt?"

"Well, jest like any other country—it's got four sides to it."

"Could you get out of it, and avoid all the usual routes?"

"Shore. But why pick me out? There's plenty other folks on Halfaday."

I PICKED you for several reasons—mainly because I believe you've got more brains than any of the others. I've

kept my eyes and ears open since I've been here, and I've learned that you know the country as few others know it, that you've got plenty of nerve, and that you'll stop at nothing in accomplishing a purpose. But more particularly because I saw at once that you disliked his lordship from the first—a dislike that was, of course, aggravated when he dragged you off into the hills that morning you were suffering from a hang-over."

"Yeah," admitted Black John. "That was a hell of a thing to do. It shows he ain't got no compassion. I went because I'd told him I would. An' besides, I wouldn't let him think he was a better man than me. But I damn near died that first day."

"He's got the constitution of an ox, and he's as cold blooded as a fish. But he certainly admires your ability as a guide, and he trusts you implicitly. All of which fits into the plan beautifully, and should make your part very easy."

"Yeah? Well, I couldn't say—bein' as you ain't told me nothin' about the plan, nor yet what part I'm picked out fer to play."

"The plan is simple. Merely that you and I will get that four hundred thousand pounds that will be turned over to his lordship on the first of September."

"Somethin' to look forward to, at least," observed Black John. "Figgerin' right around five dollars to the pound, it makes an item of a couple of million."

"Just so!" agreed Breen, rubbing his hands. "Enough to make us both rich for the rest of our lives!"

"Provídin'," reminded Black John, "that we git it."

"We'll get it! If we both of us play our parts, there's no chance that we won't get it. Then it'll be up to you to get us out of the country. His lordship tells me that very shortly, within a day or two, you are going on another hunting expedition. You must see to it that he doesn't come back."

"You mean—knock him off!"

"Exactly. It should be extremely easy—a shot from behind, and the disposal of the body where no one will ever find it."

"Sounds simple," admitted Black John. "An' where do we go from there? Ain't you got no part? I don't like to hog the center of the stage."

MY PART begins on the river. I intend to impersonate his lordship, and receive the money from the messenger. We are about of a size. His clothing will fit me perfectly."

"But hell! You can't grow no walrus mustache in less'n a month! An' if you did, it wouldn't be yeller!"

The man grinned. "The mustache won't be necessary. No one in Dawson ever saw his lordship, and neither has the messenger who will come from Montreal, nor the two police officers who are to accompany him as guards. I have checked these facts very carefully, and also I have all other information necessary to the carrying out of the plan. I have had access to his lordship's private correspondence as well as his business correspondence, and I am prepared to answer any and all questions that may arise in connection with the turning over of the money. Not only that, but I can imitate his lordship's signature to perfection."

"Yeah, but how the hell is anyone goin' to imitate *him?* What with the way he talks, an' acts, an' poppin' that glass in an' out of his eye——"

The man laughed shortly. "Don't let that worry you. I have very successfully impersonated men of title before. I served for years in different capacities in some of the best families of England, and I kept my eyes and my ears open. I was learning my trade—and you may believe I learned it well. You may rest assured that I shall overlook no little item either of speech or manner."

"Where did you hook up with Lordship?" asked Black John, regarding the man keenly.

"In Vancouver. He traveled from South Africa by way of Japan, and came across

to Vancouver. I read in the paper of his arrival, and that his man had died at sea, so I applied for the position. I had excellent references, and he was only too glad to engage me. I have reason to believe," he added with a wink, "that he has found my services eminently satisfactory."

WELL," opined Black John, after a few moments of silence, "if you make any slip, it's goin' to be your funeral, an' not mine. If somethin' goes wrong, an' you git caught down there in Dawson, it ain't goin' to do you no good to squawk, because when I git through with Lordship, there ain't goin' to be no *corpus delicti* to pull on me. If you was to spill yer guts about me killin' him, I'll jest claim yer a damn liar—an' stand pat."

"Exactly."

"An' here's another thing—if you think I'm goin' to play flunky fer you around Dawson, like you're playin' flunky fer Lordship, you're way off on yer figures."

"No, no! You wouldn't fit the part, at all! In fact, you and I are not to be seen together in Dawson, nor any place else on the river. I will pick up a native or two to take me to Dawson, and you will follow with an outfit held in readiness for the getaway. We must not be seen together under any circumstances. After I have obtained the money, we will slip quietly out of the country."

"Suits me," replied Black John, regarding the man narrowly. "But don't you kind of hate to knock him off thataway? Lordship ain't a bad guy in a lot of ways."

The man's eyes narrowed, and his lips drew into a snarl. "No, damn him! I hate all toffs! What do they care for the likes of me and you? They'd do us in, in a minute, without battin' an eye!"

VII

TWO days later, the Englishman accosted Black John in Cushing's saloon. "I say, Smith, how about another huntin' trip? That was a jolly old bear—that lawst one! My word!"

"Your word, eh?" grinned Black John. "Well, it wouldn't be mine! From where I laid I couldn't see nothin' jolly about him. But mebbe it's jest a misonderstandin' of terms."

"But it was jolly sport, don't you know! Takin' one's stand that way and knowin' that one had to stop him—and the beggar comin' on and on! It was extraordinary. Rippin'!"

"Yeah, even rip-snortin' wouldn't be overstatin' the case. Is yer hired man any good at rollin' up cabins?"

"At what?"

"Rollin' up cabins. It's like this—a feller come amongst us a while back who declared his intentions of remainin' on the crick more er less permanent, an' we told him when he'd got out his logs we'd go up an' help him roll up a cabin, so he won't have to winter in no tent. His claim's four, five mile up the crick, an' we was goin' up there today. I was figgerin' if yer man could take my place, me an' you could git started. If not, we'll have to wait till tomorrow."

"Certainly. Breen would be doing nothin' anyway. He'll go. He may never have helped with a cabin. But he can do as he's told. He'll be here directly. He's packin' my duffel bag."

Half a dozen men drifted in and lined up at the bar, and presently Breen appeared.

"You are to accompany these men, Breen," ordered the Englishman, "and help them to build a cabin. Smith had intended to go, but he and I are off on a hunt."

"Very good, sir," answered the man, and as he followed the others out the door, Black John slipped him a wink.

STOPPING at his own cabin for his pack sack, Black John accompanied the Englishman to the cabin of One Eyed John, where he lighted his pipe, seated himself in a chair, and elevated his heels to the table top, shoving aside some books to make room. Locking his hands behind his

head, he regarded the other thoughtfully.

"Lordship," he began abruptly, "if you hadn't had all the guts in the world, I wouldn't be here. That damn bear wouldn't have left enough of me to grease a skillet with."

"Ho, don't mention it! It was great sport—really!"

"Yeah? Well, I don't mind admittin' that it had got past the sportin' stage fer me. What I'm gittin' at is—you saved my life, an' there ain't no two ways about it."

"But a man couldn't funk it, don't you know!"

"Mebbe not, whatever that is, but he could damn well have stayed up on that rock where he was safe! An' believe me —most men would have done it. No one would ever have known the difference."

"But the man himself would have known, Smith. All his life, he'd jolly well know he'd funked it!"

"It beats hell," muttered Black John, more to himself than to the other. "An' it jest goes to show that you can't never tell by the looks of a man what's inside of him. But that ain't neither here nor there. The fact is, I'm plumb grateful to you fer what you done. I'm goin' to spill you an' earful, fer yer own good, an' you've got to believe every damn word of it. You'll git corroboration later from Corporal Downey of the Mounted."

"Spill an earful? I don't quite——"

"I said I'm goin' to tell you somethin'," interrupted Black John impatiently. "An' you kin check it up later with the police. In the first place, that man Breen of yourn is nothin' but a damn low-lived, widder-killin' skunk."

"Aw. Extraordinary! But er—you'll pawdon me, I hope, if I don't quite follow. You Americans have peculiar mannerisms of speech, don't you know."

"Yeah? Well, the mannerism I jest used is one that's expressive of opprobrium. I was tryin' in my feeble way to hint that Breen is ondesirable as a companion."

"Aw? Yes—certainly—certainly! But my dear fellow, as a servant he is a jewel."

"Um-hum. An' as a widder-killer, he ain't hardly got no equal, at all. Ain't you never heard that some jewels is bad luck?"

"Bad luck! Haw, haw! A pun! Breen is a jewel—some jewels bring bad luck—therefore Breen should bring bad luck! Clever, by George—haw, haw!"

"If it was possible," observed Black John, eyeing the other sourly, "to trade guts fer brains—what a man *you'd* be!"

"Aw? Another quaint expression. I don't pretend to follow. But you said 'widow-killer.' You mean to infer I suppose, that Breen is a lady killer—a masher?"

NOPE. I was usin' the term in its strictest sense—meanin' one who kills widders. Listen, Lordship—you picked Breen up in Vancouver to take the place of yer man that died on shipboard."

"Yes. His references were of the best. And I have had no fault to find."

"You wouldn't have, neither. A man can't find no fault, after he's murdered."

"Murdered! What do you mean—murdered?"

"It's jest one of them quaint expressions us Americans uses to indicate the fix a

man's in after havin' been feloniously deprived of his life."

"But surely you don't mean to infer that Breen would murder me!"

"Nope. He ain't got the guts to. That's why he delegated the chore to me."

"Extraordinary!"

"Yeah, ain't it? But I kin see where

the plan has its drawbacks. So, if you'll button yer lip fer a few minutes, I'll wise you up."

"Button my lip?"

"Yeah—scream like an oyster, yodel like a fishin' worm; in other words, commit a profound silence."

"Aw! But an oyster, you know, doesn't scream!"

Black John shook his head in resignation. "Listen, Lordship," he said almost plaintively. "Fer God's sake, keep yer trap shet, an' ketch you an earful of this. Them references of Breen's was phony. His name ain't Breen—it's Hawkins. He's worked fer lords an' dukes, an' things till he knows all their ways. His grift is to fake up credentials, pose as some nobility, an' then rob the folks that's took in by him. His latest prank, before he hooked up with you, was to torture a widder woman in Manitoba till she told him where her cache was, an' then he murdered an' robbed her, an' beat it fer Vancouver, where he met up with you. His present intentions is no less felonious. He's dug into your papers, both business an' private, till he knows plenty. He knows you expect four hundred thousan' pounds to be delivered to you by messenger in Dawson, on September first. He aims to get that money. With your clothes, an' luggage, an' credentials, he will pose as you, an' receive the money from the messenger, an' sign up for it in your name."

"But," cried the other, "how could he? I'll jolly well be there, myself."

"Not," grinned Black John, "if I done my jolly little part."

"Your part?"

"Yeah. You see, Breen, er Hawkins, I should say, needed a little help in the matter of gittin' out of the country an' whatnot. An' also he didn't have no yen fer knockin' you off—widder women with their hands tied, bein' more in his line. So after lookin' over all the local talent an' makin' certain guarded inquiries, he decides that my criminal record is satisfactory—it havin' to do with the h'istin' of an army payroll. So, believin' that I don't like you, he offers me a half interest in the enterprise, providin' I'll knock you off an' then manage the git-away. The proposition looks attractive—except fer a couple of p'ints that Breen overlooked. In the first place, he overestimated my depravity—bein' as I'm one of them weird characters that deems murder fer profit to be unethical. An' in the second place, he misconstrued my feelin's toward you—basin' his surmise on the incident where you yanked me off into the hills, whilst I was yearnin' fer a quiet death from that hangover; rather than on the incident where you saved my life at the risk of yourn. That there was a tactical error on Breen's part—which he'll damn well realize, when he's danglin' from the jolly old rafter."

BUT how could you know about his murderin' this widow, down in Manitoba?"

"Corporal Downey told me. He's in charge of the Mounted detachment, in Dawson. He's on the look-out fer Breen—er Hawkins, as he knows him. He's got his fingerprints, an' is hopin' he'll show up on the river. Me an' Cush figgered you was him, when you first come to Halfaday. Downey said he'd most likely be posin' as some lord."

"But you nonchalantly admit that you are a criminal—and still you fraternize with the police?"

"Oh shore! Downey ain't got a better friend in the world than me. American payrolls ain't none of his funeral, so long as there ain't no extradition papers got out. An' besides, he knows I'm ethical as hell!"

"But suppose such papers should be forwarded to him?"

"He'd try to serve 'em. He ain't no shirk. He's hell fer dooty, Downey is. But he wouldn't have no luck. I'd jest step acrost the line an' set on a rock till he returned the papers with the notation that I'd crossed back into American territory. We're right clost to the line, here on Halfaday."

"Extraordinary!"

"Yeah—handy, too!"

"You say Breen actually robbed this widow, after murdering her?"

"That's the gossip."

"Did he obtain considerable booty?"

"About a hundred thousan' dollars worth of English banknotes."

"My word! We will search his effects, at once. Those two bags under the bunk are his. That money should be returned!"

"Hold on, Lordship! There ain't nothin' in goin' off half cocked. I've give the matter thought. We can't do nothin' like that. Them bags is locked. We ain't police. Not only it wouldn't be ethical to bust into 'em—but it would be downright felonious. An' besides, it would warn Breen that we suspected him. Here's the way I've got it doped out. Me an' you'll hit out, like we was goin' huntin'. We'll slip down the crick in a canoe, an' down the White to the Yukon. Then I'll send a man on down to Dawson with you, an' you report to Downey that his man Hawkins is on Halfaday. Tell him what I told you. Then come on back up here with him, an' Downey kin search Breen's bags."

"And arrest Breen, too!"

"Oh, shore—if he deems it worth while."

"But if the man is a murderer, of course he will arrest him!"

"Yeah, it seems likely."

"But suppose Breen should become suspicious and escape with all that money?"

"He won't. Why should he? He's after your four hundred thousan'. I'll come back in a few days an' report to him that I've bumped you off, an' then we'll set tight till it's time fer the pay-off."

"Excellent! Let's be goin'!" The man reached for the pack sack that Breen had made ready for him.

JEST a minute," said Black John. "Bein' as this here's a canoe trip, an' no back packin'—an' bein' as yer bound straight fer Dawson, an' are sailin' open an' aboveboard under yer own colors, as a sailor would say—why not ditch that pack sack, an' take yer own satchel yonder? It'll be kind of a more dignified outfit fer a lord to be sportin' in Dawson. It's got yer name on it, too—which would help to identify you."

"A good idea. It will be jolly well more comfortable than diggin' into that pack-sack!"

"Shore, it will. Is the satchel empty?"

"I don't know. Breen attends to the luggage."

"All right. Give me the key, an' I'll throw yer stuff into it. Meanwhile, you kin carry my pack sack down to the canoe."

The Englishman produced a bunch of keys, indicated one and passing the bunch to Black John, picked up the pack sack and stepped from the room. Working swiftly, Black John opened the portmanteau and dumped the contents onto a bunk. These consisted of various articles of clothing, and sundry toilet articles—but no Bank of England notes. Black John scowled, for recollecting Breen's extreme solicitude for this bag, he was almost certain that it contained the notes—the more so, after having found out that Breen, and not his lordship, was the murderer. In case of search, Breen's own baggage would be found clean. Deftly Black John's fingers explored the silk lining, and suddenly a grin twisted the lips beneath the black beard. Hastily carrying the portmanteau to the table, he began to transfer the contents of the pack sack to it. A moment later he joined the Englishman and deposited the bag in the canoe.

"There, that'll be a lot handier'n the pack sack. Hell—what I claim, if a man's a lord, he might's well look like one, an' not like a damn prospector!"

"Breen will think it peculiar that I should take the portmanteau on a hunting trip," opined the other.

"I'll fix that, all right," said Black John. "I'll tell him that when you found out that

this was to be a canoe trip instead of a packin' trip, you insisted on takin' the satchel. I'll tell him you claimed it was handier."

The man nodded. "He'll jolly well believe it, too. I remember that I quarrelled about the inconvenience of the bally pack sack. The thing one wants is always at the bottom."

VIII

ONE morning a week later Black John pushed open the door of Cushing's saloon and entered, to find the proprietor alone behind the bar.

"Got back, eh?" observed Cush, setting out bottle and glasses. "Where's Lordship?"

Black John ignored the question as he filled his glass to the brim. "Skullduggery," he observed irrelevantly, "is rife on Halfaday."

"Meanin'?"

"Meanin' that me an' you was in error about Lordship's bein' the one that murdered that widder."

"Don't go draggin' me into no error," replied the somber faced Cush. "I claimed he was a good guy, right on the start. It was you that besmirched his reputation, an' you claimed he wasn't no lordship, to boot."

"Well, he is—an' a damn good one. You was only guessin' But I proved it!"

"Yeah? What did he do—save yer life, agin?"

"No. I saved his'n."

"It's a horse apiece then so far," observed Cush. "But savin' a man's life don't necessarily absolve him from widder-killin'."

"Breen's the one that done the Manitoba job."

"That sounds more reasonable," admitted Cush. "But what's it got to do with skullduggery on Halfaday?"

"Nothin'. But connivin' an' conspirin' to commit another murder an' robbery is skullduggery in the first degree, an' as such, is hangable—especially when a man's got a widder-killin' background to start with."

"Who did he connive with to kill who?"

"He suggested I should take Lordship off in the hills an' knock him off, so me an' him could acquire a large sum of money that Lordship was expectin' in Dawson on the first of the month—him to impersonate Lordship, an' receive this money. The plan was simple an' the pay was attractive, but somehow it savored of bad ethics."

"How in hell could Bean expect to pass himself off fer Lordship?"

"He claims he's got away with it before. That's how I spotted him fer the widder-killer. Downey said that was his grift."

"What did you do about it?"

BLACK JOHN grinned. "I agreed, of course. You wouldn't expect a known criminal like me to turn down a big chunk of easy money, would you? The day before me an' Lordship pulled out, I sent Red John down to the mouth of the White to wait fer us an' take Lordship on to Dawson. He'll connect up with Corporal Downey, an' they'll come back here, hell-bent, to grab off the malefactor."

"H-u-u-m-m. An' if Downey comes up an' arrests him, what'll become of that hundred thousan' Bean was supposed to have got off'n the widder?"

"Well, that's problematical as a perfessor would say. It would be accordin' to whether Downey found it er not. If he did, it would undoubtless go to them stray cats."

"I ain't never liked cats."

"Me neither."

"Has Bean got a satchel?"

"Two of 'em. They're locked."

"H-u-u-m-m," uttered Cush. "If Downey comes, he'll search them satchels an' them damn cats'll git all that money. An' if Bean has cached it somewheres else an' squawks, they'll git it. An' if he don't squawk, no one will ever git it."

"Onlest they could find the cache," reminded Black John. "If Breen was hung fer skullduggery before Downey got here, he couldn't squawk."

"But there ain't no murder been committed on Halfaday," reminded Cush. "How in hell could we hang him?"

"Yer reasonin's faulty," opined Black John. "Connivin' an' conspirin' to murder, constitutes the crime of skullduggery, whether the murder has been consummated, er not. The law is plain on that p'int. You kin see the logic of it, Cush—the conspiracy is still open. There ain't nothin' to prevent me from knockin' Lordship off at some future time, if I'm so disposed. An' as fer as Breen knows any different, he's already dead. His intent is plain—an' he done his damndest to carry it out. Now then—no matter how

laudible it would be to kill a widder which liked cats, yet, under a strict construction of the statutes, it constitutes the crime of murder. In other words, Cush—me an' you knows damn well that Breen needs hangin'. He's committed one murder, an' has conspired to commit another, an' if he's let live, there's no tellin' how many more he'll commit. If Downey arrests him an' they ship him back to Manitoba, the chances is that someone somewhere along the line would bungle his demise. It looks like it's up to us to rid society of a dangerous element. An' we ain't men to shirk our duty! You call a miners' meetin' fer this noon—an' I'll slip down to One Eyed John's shack an' fetch Breen."

IX

BLACK JOHN found Breen, arrayed in a suit of his lordship's clothing, a monocle fitted to his eye, lolling back reading a book. The man addressed him abruptly:

"Have you carried out your part of the program?"

Black John grinned. "If anyone ever finds his body, it won't be my fault. They won't never pull no *corpus delicti* on me."

"Where's his portmanteau?"

"You mean his big satchel? Well, you don't need to worry about that, neither."

"What do you mean?" cried the man, leaping suddenly to his feet and facing Black John as the monocle popped from his eye.

"Why, I mean that it's jest as much rubbed out, an' obliterated as he is! You don't ketch me leavin' no evidence like that layin' around. You won't never see that satchel agin—not even a strap nor buckle of it! When I do a job, I do it thorough."

The man's face went purple, then livid, and his eyes seemed about to pop from his head with fury. "You fool!" he roared, in a voice choked with rage. "You damned idiot! If I didn't need you, I'd kill you where you stand!"

"You—an' who else?" inquired Black John as his fist shot out and landed on the man's jaw with a force that sent him reeling backward to collapse on the bunk. Thoroughly enraged, the huge man without moving from his tracks stood glowering at the cringing figure on the bunk. "You wouldn't kill no one, except a widder with her hands tied! We know all about that Manitoba job—an' it don't set good on our stummick! An' besides that—plottin' to knock off a man like Lordship, which he's got more guts in his finger nail parin's than you've got in yer whole line of ancestry. Lordship's gone on down to Dawson to talk it over with the Mounted, an' if it's any comfort to you them bank notes you stole off'n the widder is all safe an'

sound jest where you cached 'em, in under the linin' of his satchel. But you'll never lay hands on 'em. You're goin' on up to Cush's with me, an' play the title role in a damn good, thoroughgoin' hangin'! Come on! We're losin'——"

THE sentence ended abruptly in a roar of shots, as the figure leaped from the bunk, a revolver in his hand fogging the air with blue smoke. As Black John crashed forward against the table, his hand flew to his shirt front, and as he slipped sidewise to the floor, his forty-five roared once.

The next thing he knew, Old Cush was bending over him, shaking him gently. As from afar came the sound of his voice:

"John, John, wake up! Are you dead?"

"How the hell could I wake up, if I was dead? I'm dizzy as hell, though. Git the boys, an' take out after Breen! I'll hang that damn skunk, if it's the last thing I ever do!"

"Hangin' him would be a waste of time, John," remarked Cush, pointing to a figure that sprawled at the foot of the bunk. "Yer slug ketched him square between the eyes. Hold still a minute till I tie my handkerchief around yer head. The blood's runnin' down into yer beard."

"The beard'll wash without shrinkin'," replied Black John. "Keep that damn dirty rag off'n me till you rustle some iodine. It's bad enough to git creased side of the head, without dyin' of blood poison. If that damn fool had of took his time, instead of tryin' to empty his gun all to once, he'd of got me. I didn't even know he was heeled."

"I wonder which of these valises is his'n?" speculated Cush, eyeing the array of bags, as he helped Black John to his feet. "It looks like we ort to kind of investigate 'em, before Downey gits here."

Black John shook his head. "You've got a criminal streak in you, Cush, that I deplore. We ain't got no right to bust into them satchels. It would be burglary—an' you know damn well we don't stand fer no crime on Halfaday."

"Burglary, hell!" cried Old Cush, in disgust. "There's a hundred thousan' dollars somewhere that'll go to stray cats! There ain't no sense in that!"

"It's shore sad to contemplate," admitted Black John gloomily. "But ethics is ethics, Cush. We can't afford to bog down on our ethics fer no paltry hundred thousan'."

"It's a cinch he won't never squawk to no one about where it is—an' if it ain't in them valises, we might find it later."

"In such case," said Black John gravely, "we could keep it with a clear conscience. Who the hell's comin' up the bank?"

"We thought we heard shots," panted the Englishman, suddenly blocking the doorway.

CORPORAL DOWNEY, followed by Red John pushed on into the room. "What come off, here?" he asked, staring from Black John's bloody head, to the crumpled body on the floor.

"This here Hawkins, alias Breen, tried to pull off a homicide. But it back-fired on him. I come down here to invite him up to Cush's, pendin' your arrival, an' I must of said somethin' that hurt his feelin's, 'cause he begun callin' me names. I slugged him one on the jaw, an' knocked him down on the bunk, an' he come up a-smokin'. I got one in the head, an' draw'd as I went down. The next thing I know'd Cush here was fetchin' me to."

"Extraordinary!" exclaimed the Englishman. "Look, the beggar is wearin' my clothin'!"

"Yeah, but it ain't hurt none," grinned Black John. "I held high."

"Oh, I don't mind the bally clothin', don't you know! But the nerve of him! I say, Smith, wait till I fetch my portmanteau! Your head should be bandaged! I always carry dressin' with me for emergencies."

When he had stepped from the room, Black John turned to Corporal Downey. "Looks like I'd saved you quite a chore, at that. We didn't look fer you fer damn near a week yet."

Downey grinned. "I got word from White Horse that an Englishman an' his man had hit out fer Halfaday, an' I was on my way up here when I run onto his lordship, comin' down river with Red John. I thought, first, he was the man I was after, but he soon convinced me who he is, an' we come on up, hell bent. We'd already received word to show Lord Creechy-Montrose every consideration when he got here, an' we was also warned about the big shipment of money he'd be gettin'."

IT WAS but the work of a few minutes for the Englishman, with Downey's assistance, to cleanse the long furrow plowed by Breen's bullet, and get it properly bandaged.

"Where's Breen's outfit?" asked Downey. "I want to get holt of that hundred thousan'."

His Lordship pointed out the two bags, and Downey opened them with keys from the dead man's pocket. One contained nothing but clothing, but in the other was found a comprehensive collection of forged credentials, letters of recommendation, and references signed by some of the most illustrious names of England. Neither contained so much as a single bank note.

"Well, that's that," said Downey. "He prob'ly cached it somewheres where no one ever will find it."

"If I do," grinned Black John, "you kin bet yer last blue one that I'll never turn it over to no stray cats."

"I don't know as anyone could blame you much," said Downey. "It's a good thing those grips were locked—or I might have had my suspicions. Well, I'll be headin' back fer Dawson. You goin' with me, yer lordship, er do you want to stay here an' finish out yer hunt?"

"I believe I'll accompany you to Dawson. There are some matters that will require my attention. I hope, however, to come back later, and spend a month hunting with my good friend."

He paused, fumbled in his pocket, and producing a packet of bank notes, turned to Black John. "In the mean time, as a slight token of my own esteem, and also, on behalf of the syndicate of capitalists I represent, whose money you undoubtedly saved, I hope you will accept this thousand pounds."

BLACK JOHN cleared his throat and waved the money aside. "No, no, Lordship! I didn't give a damn about no syndicate. What I done was purely out of friendship fer you. I won't never fergit that bear! But, if you really feel that you'd like to make me a little present, I'd shore feel proud if you'd give me that satchel of yourn. This here one that carries yer own belongin's. It's got a personal touch to it that I'll value a great deal higher than any thousan' pounds."

"It's yours!" cried the Englishman, "and welcome! I assure you I am deeply touched by this show of devotion!"

"I'll say you be—I mean—er—I'm glad to hear you say it! So long, Lordship. Here, let me help you to the canoe with them other bags."

When the canoe had disappeared around the first bend of the creek, Old Cush regarded Black John with frowning disapproval. "Well, of all the damn fools I ever seen—you take the cake! Turn down a thousan' pound in good money fer a damn yaller valise that ain't worth no more'n ten dollars, at the outside!"

"Oh, yes it is," grinned Black John, picking up the portmanteau. "These here leather satchels runs into money."

"Huh, that there bullet must of knocked all the brains out of yer head! What the hell you standin' there chucklin' about?"

"Oh nothin'. I was jest thinkin' of stray cats. Come on up to the saloon, an' I'll buy a drink."

"How about a game of that there flyloo?"

"Not by a damn sight! You'd cheat!"

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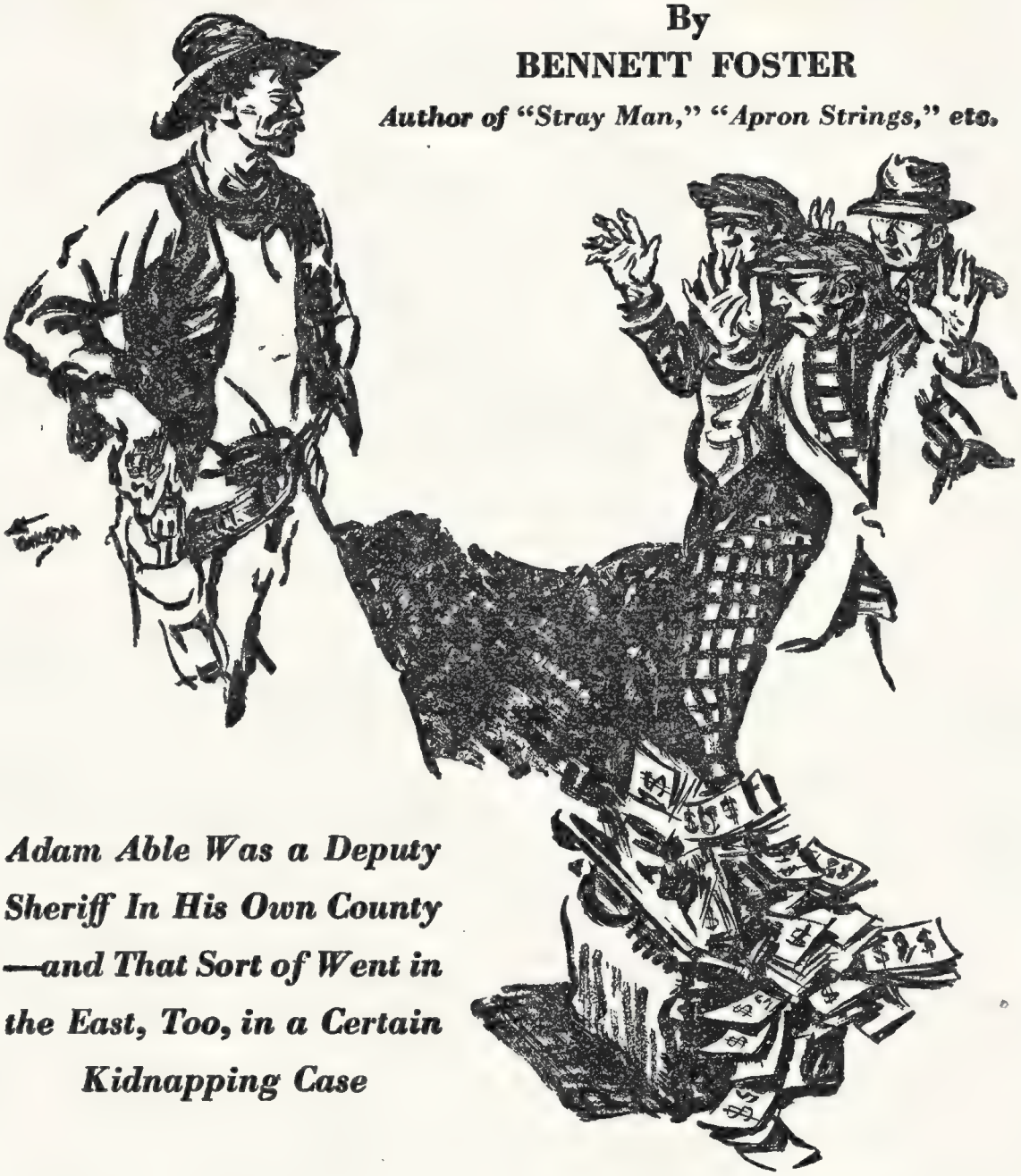

Adam Able Was a Deputy Sheriff In His Own County —and That Sort of Went in the East, Too, in a Certain Kidnapping Case

ONE million dollars worth of Old Adam Able stood on the station platform at Lindmore, and confronted thirty million dollars worth of Barrons. Able looked like fifty cents and the Barrons looked their millions. Behind Adam the train that had brought him, moved out slowly. Behind the Barrons two State Police officers, a captain and a sergeant, shifted uneasily.

Adam said, "I got your wire," and thrust out his hand.

Rufus Barron took the proffered hand. "I'm glad you're here," he announced. Adam liked the way Rufus shook hands.

"This is my son," Rufus gestured to the other Barron. "Waite."

Adam looked Waite Barron over. Ellen had written that she was going to marry Waite. The boy was slim with an athlete's slimness, and his eyes were blue and steady.

Adam said, "Howdy," and shook hands again. Waite Barron's grip was convulsive, as though he had just made up his mind to something. Rufus Barron turned his head and nodded toward the two officers. "Captain Claiborn and Sergeant Peters," he said. "They're on the case."

Claiborn and Peters bowed slightly. Adam dropped his half extended hand. He had intended to shake hands again. Evidently neither Peters nor Claiborn expected him to. Two cameras clicked, the news photographers bending over their machines and peering into the finders. Adam saw four keen-faced young fellows of the type he had come to know as reporters, hovering beside the depot door. He wondered why they did not close in. He had not found reporters shy at Kansas City or Chicago.

"We might as well go," Barron said.

Adam stooped and lifted his lank grip from beside his booted feet. Boots were at variance with good custom, he knew, but a man wears what he has and finds comfortable. Anyhow they were polished.

Rufus Barron lead the way around the station. A chauffeur held open the door of a big Rolls. Barron gestured for Adam to enter, crawled in himself, and Waite Barron followed. Claiborn took one of the folding seats and Peters joined the driver in front. The car started noiselessly and purred away from the depot. Barron lit a cigar and proffered one to Adam. Adam shook his head and brought out the makings. His faded gray eyes were shrewd as he watched Barron.

Barron shifted the cigar. "We haven't heard from them since the first note," he said.

Adam lit his smoke, puffed once, and holding the thin brown bundle of tobacco between his fingers, made a statement.

"I read the papers," he said. "Outside of them an' your wire, I don't know a thing."

"We don't know much." Barron's blue eyes were keen beneath their bushy white brows. "Ellen had an engagement to play golf with Waite at the Country Club. He was late and she started around alone. Somewhere between the fifth and sixth green she disappeared. The caddy had gone on to the green and she was playing out of a trap. Her club was found and nothing else. That was about three o'clock. That night we got a note telling us that she was held for fifty thousand dollars and that we would be informed as to the date and manner of delivery. The note was sent special delivery. That's about all we know."

ADAM puffed reflectively on his cigarette and waited. He knew more was coming. Claiborn supplied it. "There was a black car with a New York license seen near the club that afternoon," he said. "We've tried to trace the car but we haven't had much luck."

Still Adam waited. Waite put in his bit. "I asked dad to wire you," he said. "Ellen had spoken of you often. She wanted you to come to her commencement exercises. She was to have graduated next week."

"Mebbe she will yet," said Adam.

Rufus Barron rumbled again. "We called the police when the caddy reported her disappearance," he said. "Otherwise we'd have waited. I think the kidnappers are holding off on account of the police."

Claiborn's voice was firm. "The police are going to stay right on the job, Mister Barron. We've gone into that."

"How about these newspapers?" asked Adam.

Rufus Barron frowned. "They're a nuisance," he growled. "I've forbidden the reporters to come on the place."

The big car turned north between two stone pillars and purred up a drive, stopping under a portico. The chauffeur opened the door. The men in the back seat got out and the car moved off. A liveried man opened the door and Barron led the way into the massive house.

"Take Mr. Able's things to the north wing," he said to the man in livery. "He'll have the rooms next to mine." Adam eyed

his lank bag uneasily. He knew that he didn't have enough clothes to impress the servant.

"I reckon I'd better go up," he said.

"You'll want to rest and clean up," Barron was hospitable. "I'll come up soon."

ADAM followed the servant toward a hall. In his bedroom, awed by a canopied bed, period furniture, and the blank face of the servant, Adam sat down. There were two other rooms in the suite, a sitting room and a bath. The bathroom was as big as Adam's office on the LN. The liveried man began to open the bag and Adam forestalled him.

"There ain't a thing in there except some boots an' underwear an' two pair of socks," he said. "You might as well leave it."

The man's face was immobile as he stepped back from the bag.

"Yes, sir," he said. "Was there anything else, sir?"

"Just a little quiet," suggested Adam. The liveried man went out. Adam got up and opened the bag. One article at a time came from it. Adam put the things on the bed, thrust a gun under the pillow, and went to the bathroom. He washed vigorously and dried his face and hands. He was crawling into a clean shirt when there was a knock on the door.

Adam yelled, "Come in," and tucked in the shirt. Rufus Barron entered.

Adam finished with the shirt, ran a comb through his sparse gray hair and went into the sitting room. Barron was occupying a big chair. Adam sat down.

Barron puffed twice on his cigar, knocked off the ash and spoke suddenly. "I'm glad you came," he said. "We needed you here. These fool policemen won't let the thing drop and they're delaying our hearing from the kidnappers. You're Ellen's legal guardian. You can make them drop it."

Adam nodded absently. "I'd like to get this cleaned up," he said. "We're goin' to brand right away an' I ought to get back."

Barron looked at Able curiously. "Ellen's talked a great deal about you," he said.

Adam said, "Yeah."

"I want you to understand just how I feel, Mister Able." Barron considered his cigar. "I'm fond of Ellen and Waite's in love with her. I thought that perhaps it would be better if they waited a while. Now I wish that I had allowed them to marry a month ago. It would give me more rights in this matter."

ADAM made no comment and Barron, after a pause, spoke again. "I wish you would order the police to withdraw from the case," he said. "That will give these kidnappers a clear field. We can communicate with them and pay them what they ask. All I want is to have Ellen back again."

"That ain't all I want." Adam's voice was a soft drawl.

Barron nodded. "I understand," he said. "After all, though, getting the girl is the main thing."

Adam said, "Yeah," again. He was watching Barron intently.

Barron got up. "I know you want to think things over," he said. "We'll dine at seven. Informally. Is there anything you want?"

"I'd like to see that note, an' I'd like to talk to that kid that was with Ellen, an' I'd like to see one of them policemen." Adam ticked off the items. "Can I do that?"

Barron nodded. "I'll send Claiborn up," he said. "It will take a while to get the boy. He's at police headquarters."

"I can go down there," Adam proffered.

"No need. I'll have him brought here. After you've talked to them perhaps you'll join me in a drink before dinner. My den is next to this room."

Adam said, "Thanks," and Barron went out. He had hardly gone before there was another knock on the door. Again Adam yelled, "Come in." Waite Barron entered.

The boy stood uneasily beside the door and Adam gestured toward a chair. "Set down," he said.

Waite Barron seated himself. "Dad didn't want to wire you," he said suddenly.

"So?" Adam lifted sparse eyebrows.

"No. He was afraid that you would . . . I don't think he knew . . ."

"Afraid I'd ball things up, huh? Yore dad is pretty much used to havin' his own way, ain't he?"

Waite Barron nodded.

"So'm I," said Adam.

"Ellen was so fond of you, she had talked so much about you, that I insisted," Waite spoke again.

"I'm all she's got," said Adam. "I worked for her daddy an' when he died, I kind of took over for him along with my own stuff."

"She told me about that. I just wanted to tell you that I love Ellen and that I'll do everything I can——"

"Pshaw," said Adam, "of course you do an' of course you will. So will I. So will yore dad. I've saw fellers like him before. You're afraid he'll offend me, ain't you?"

Waite nodded. "Dad's brusque," he said. "He has always run things. I was afraid that you——"

"Don't you worry none about me," said Adam. "Me an' yore dad'll get along like a dogie an' a milk cow. You go on now. I got to talk to Claiborn."

"Are you going to call the police off the case?"

"Mebbe. Mebbe not. I'll see."

Waite got up. "I think they're doing everything that can be done," he said. "Claiborn is a fine man. I wish——"

"We'll see," said Adam. "Here's Claiborn now."

Another knock sounded on the door.

YOUNG Waite went out and Claiborn entered the room. Claiborn's face was tight. Adam gestured toward a chair. "Set down," he said.

The Captain seated himself. Adam fussed about the table. There was a cabinet under the table and when he opened it he found the makings.

He grinned at Claiborn. "Have a drink?" he invited.

The officer shook his head. "On duty," he said shortly.

Adam poured himself a modest libation and swallowed it. "So'm I," he announced. "I wanted to talk to you a little an' I want to see that note."

Claiborn reached into an inner pocket and pulled out a big envelope. He took another envelope from that and passed it over. Adam scanned the envelope, saw the post office stamp on it, and then unfolded the paper inside. It was typewritten and gave in detail what Rufus Barron had given him in substance. At the bottom of the missive there was an assurance of Ellen Lassel's safety, and it was signed with a typewritten design. Adam grunted and passed the note and envelope back.

"You can see that it was mailed in Baltimore," said Claiborn. "That doesn't mean anything except that they haven't gone very far."

"Hadn't gone very far," corrected Adam. "What have you fellers done?"

"We've followed every possible line," Claiborn was earnest. "We've got the Federal people working on it, but we haven't pushed it here because we want the girl back above everything else. Tell me, are you going to ask us to retire from the case?"

Adam shook his head. "I'm kind of a law officer myse'f," he announced. "I got a deputy sheriff's commission for Luna County in my pocket. It kind of gives me standin'."

Claiborn looked relieved. "I'm glad you're not going to take us off the case," he said simply. "That's been done several times and it's given us a black eye. The police can't do much unless they're in from the first."

Adam nodded. "No," he said, "I ain't goin' to ask you to get off the case, but I am goin' to ask you not to interfere when it comes to us deliverin' the money. Hell, they could of had twice fifty thousand!"

CLAIBORN raised his eyebrows. "That's quite a piece of money," he reminded.

"Cows ain't what they used to be, neither," agreed Adam. "Just the same, Ellen owns about two hundred thousand acres an' she's got twice that under lease. There's mebbe twenty thousand head of cows here an' in Mexico. She owns the LN an' besides that I've got the Quarter

Circle T of my own that ain't so small. I reckon she's worth a hundred thousand."

Claiborn was interested. "You run it all for her?" he askd.

Adam nodded. "Sure," he agreed. "I'm her guardeen. I worked for her dad before he died, an' Bert Lassel set me up in the cow business."

Claiborn rose from his chair. "We'll keep working," he said. "I'll let you know whatever we learn. You can count on our coöperation concerning delivery of the money, and we'll do all we can. Thank you, Mr. Able."

Adam Able grinned thinly. "I may distress you a mite," he said, holding out his hand, "but you want to remember that I ain't plumb crazy."

Claiborn shook hands and went out. Adam sat down. There was a discreet knock on the door and Adam rose and opened it. The blank-faced servant stood in the hall.

"Mister Barron wishes to know if you will join him?" said the man.

Adam nodded, stepped back into the room and put on his coat. Then he followed the liveried coat tails down the hall one door.

Barron rose hastily as Adam came in. The room was huge, sprinkled with massive furniture. It fitted the man who owned it. Adam came in, sat down at Barron's invitation, and took the proffered drink. Sipping it, he lifted his eyes and surveyed the mounted trophies that adorned the walls. There were specimens there that would have graced a museum: Bear, deer, moose, elk, sheep and among the Carnivora, Polar bear, tiger, and one magnificent lion head. A gun case occupied one end of the room, dark weapons showing behind the polished glass.

"I hope you called the police off the case," rumbled Barron. "They aren't doing anything but hampering us."

Adam shook his head. "I didn't call 'em off," he said.

Barron scowled at him. Adam took another sip from his tall glass. "You shoot all them?" he questioned, nodding toward the heads.

For an instant Barron was taken aback. He recovered himself. "Of course I did," he began, and then laughed roughly.

"It does look a little like bragging," Barron's voice was apologetic. "Still, I've been years collecting them. I got that lion in Tanganyika." He moved over to the guncase, unlocked it and brought out a beautiful heavy weapon.

"That stopped him the third shot," he said, holding out the gun.

Adam waved it aside. "Quite an arsenal," he commented. "Most every kind of game, too. Some of it dangerous."

Barron nodded slightly.

Adam looked at him, looked hard. "Ever shoot a man?" he asked.

Barron was nonplussed. He hesitated for an instant and then exploded: "No!"

"I have," drawled Adam, and then, as an afterthought, "I didn't have him mounted though."

BARRON'S face was a scowling mask. Adam browsed along the gun case. Presently he reached in and brought out a bolt action .30-06. The gun was mounted

with a telescope sight and was beautifully stocked. Adam tried it to his shoulder, squinting through the telescope.

"I reckon it's too much to ask if you got a thirty-thirty," he drawled.

"I wouldn't have one as a gift!" Barron growled. "I can take that .30-06 you have there, and lay five shots in a two-inch circle at a hundred yards. At four hundred I can shoot six-inch groups."

"Yeah," said Adam. "Still thirty-thirty's have their uses. Look here, Mr. Barron, you just kept yorese'f from havin' me throwed out by the seat of my pants, didn't yuh?"

Again Barron was speechless. He hadn't been talked to in that easy tone and manner for years.

Adam grinned disarmingly. "Say," he drawled, "let's you an' me get down to cases."

Suddenly Barron laughed. "You're good for me," he said. "You do something to me that I hadn't thought anyone could do. Sure we'll get down to cases."

Adam seated himself on the arm of a big chair. Barron sank into another chair. The faces of both were friendly. "I'm goin' to keep them policemen on the job so yore boy Waite will have somethin' to keep him occupied," Adam drawled. "He needs some distraction. Say. You ought to lay off that boy. When this is over I reckon I'd better take him an' Ellen back to the ranch a spell. It'ud do him good."

He paused. Barron leaned forward. "I don't know what that has to do with this," he said. "Waite is twenty-four. Of course he's his own master——"

"Except when you're around," interposed Adam. "You want to remember you ain't marryin' Ellen."

Barron said nothing. Evidently he thought that Adam was either a fool or was tryin' to play one.

ADAM continued. "The policemen ain't goin' to interfere with us deliverin' the money. I saw to that. Now when I see this kid that was with Ellen, I'm all ready to get goin'. I want to see him an' then I want to see some reporters."

Barron exploded at the word. "Reporters?"

"Yeah. Reporters."

Absolute silence broken by a discreet knock on the door. Adam rose and opened it. The blank faced servant was in the hall. Behind him was Sergeant Peters and a rather small boy. The boy looked frightened. Adam pushed the liveried man aside and beckoned to the boy.

"I reckon we won't need you, Sergeant," he said.

Peters flushed but stepped back. Adam's brusqueness did not sit so well with Peters.

The boy, his face pallid, came forward slowly. Adam grinned at him as he closed the hall door. Barron had risen and was pacing back and forth.

"What's yore name, sonny?" asked Adam.

"Len Tarpley."

"My name's Able." Adam's smile was disarming. "I'm Miss Ellen's guardeen."

The boy shifted from one foot to the other. "Honest Mister Able," he said, his voice shifting from a low note to a high squeak, "I told Mister Barron an' Captain Claiborn all I know about it."

"Sure," said Adam. "I just wanted you to tell me. You an' me ought to get along fine. You got any folks?"

"Got a father."

"He around here?"

The boy frowned. "Sometimes," he answered.

"The boy's father is a common drunkard," Barron rumbled. Apparently he did not believe in regarding the feelings of others. "He's a nuisance. We had to have him——"

"N'mind," suggested Adam. "Len, do you reckon yore dad would care if you went back to New Mexico with me?"

The small face lightened, then was heavy again. "There ain't no chance of me goin'."

"Oh, I ain't so sure," Adam drawled. "You look like you might make a cow-

puncher. Now you tell me what happened."

"I was carryin' for Miss Ellen," the words came out eagerly. "I always carried for her when I wasn't out. We'd got past the Number Five an' she sliced her drive into a trap. It's a short hole an' she said for me to go up to the green an' give her line. I went up there. I couldn't see her in the trap from the green. Bye an' bye when she didn't come, I went back. Her club was there an' I took it an' went in an' told the caddy master."

"That's all, huh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Whereabouts is this trap. Could you see it?"

"Yes, sir. I could see the trap but I couldn't see behind the bunker. There's trees that come right out to the trap from the fence."

"Uhhuh," said Adam. "Say, would you like to stay here tonight?"

Len Tarpley's face brightened. "I sure would," he said.

"You can sleep with me," Adam continued. "I'll fix it up."

A servant, more portly than the blank faced man, opened the door.

"Dinner is served," he announced.

Adam went out to Peters in the hall. "I'm keepin' the kid," he said. "You tell Claiborn it's all right."

Peters was ready to demur. Something in Able's face stopped him. Adam stepped back to the butler. "You fix the kid a snack an' bed him down in my room," he directed.

The butler looked at Barron. Barron nodded.

DINNER was a silent meal. Waite ate hardly at all and Barron but little more. Adam managed to make out a good meal. When they left the table the three men repaired again to Barron's study. Cigars were lit and they sat down.

Adam looked at Waite. "Do you reckon you could find me a reporter?" he asked.

Waite was surprised. Barron looked grim. "I think there is one at the gate," Waite said.

"Would you get him for me?" asked Adam.

Waite looked at his father. Rufus Barron nodded. Waite got up. "I'll bring him myself," he said.

"That'll be fine." Adam puffed his cigar. Waite went out.

"What about that kid's dad?" questioned Adam.

"He's worthless," Barron expelled a cloud of smoke. "So is the boy. I can't see why Ellen ever used him. I had to fire Tarpley two months ago. He was a gardener."

"Have him checked on?" Adam's face was shrewd.

"The police checked on him immediately. He was dead drunk and sleeping it off at a filling station near the club."

Adam said, "Hmmmm." The talk lapsed. Adam got up and walked around the room again. Beside the guncase he paused.

"That's sure a pretty rifle," he commented, referring to the .30-06.

Barron made no reply.

Fifteen minutes passed in silence. There were steps in the hall. Waite Barron opened the door and a slight, keen-faced man came into the room. Waite stepped in after him and closed the door. Adam crossed the room and stood facing the new arrival.

"You a reporter?" he asked.

The keen faced youngster nodded. "I'm Fellows of the AP," he said.

"What paper?" questioned Adam.

"The Associated Press."

"Yeah. I'm Adam Able. I'm Ellen Lassel's guardeen."

Fellows nodded. "You wanted to see me?" he asked.

"Yeah. I wanted to tell you some things for yore paper."

Fellows appeared interested. He glanced at Rufus Barron. Adam saw the look. "Mister Barron is agreeable," he said. "First off, I want to tell you that the police

have agreed not to interfere with us payin' the ransom."

Fellows nodded. "Captain Claiborn told us that," he said noncommittally. "It's already in print."

"That's good." Adam's voice was hearty.

"Are you going to ask the police to step out of the case?" Fellows stared at Adam.

"No. Not now anyhow. We're goin' to get Ellen back. After that we don't care what the police do. We'd pay twice what they asked to get the girl back."

"You mean that you would have paid a hundred thousand?"

"Sure. Easy. Them kidnappers are pikers. We'd of paid a hundred thousand just like nothin' at all."

Again Fellows glanced at Rufus Barron. Barron was frowning. "That's about all I had to tell you," said Adam.

Fellows turned toward the door. "Thanks," he said. "It's a relief to us to know that we can get some news besides what we get from the police. We'll try to help you Mister Able."

"You print what I just told you," said Adam urgently.

"About the ransom and all?"

"About the ransom sure!"

Fellows stopped. "You're deep," he said.

"Just a creek," grinned Adam. "Just ankle deep."

Fellows smiled and went out. Barron rose and strode toward Adam. "Are you completely crazy?" he demanded.

"Just half cracked." Adam looked up at the big man.

"Telling that newspaper man that we would have paid a hundred thousand. I think you *are* crazy!"

"It's kind of fun." Adam grinned slowly. "You know, we ought to hear from them fellers tonight."

THE three men sat in the big room, talking occasionally but silent for the most part. Barron, now and then looked at Adam Able and frowned. He couldn't help liking Able, but the little, bow-legged, man outraged him. Some of the things Able had said and done had put Rufus Barron on edge. Waite Barron, noting the storm signals his father was flying, was decidedly uneasy.

About eleven o'clock the portly butler panted up the stairs and came hastily into the den. He had a note in his hand and his face was white. "It's come, sir!" he exclaimed. "I'd just gone to——"

Barron snatched the note from his hands, and tore open the envelope. He read from the typewritten sheet he held, his voice hoarse.

" 'Deliver fifty thousand dollars in small bills, fives, tens, twenties, and ones, in a suitcase. Put your son in a car and send him along the Mill Run road tomorrow afternoon between three and four. Somewhere between Ivy and the first crossroad, he will see a new tire and rim beside the road. He is to drop the suitcase there and go straight on. Do not follow him and do not have the police near there. If you want to see the girl again, obey instructions implicitly.'

"There's the same signature at the end."

"What was that last word?" queried Adam.

"Implicitly."

"That's a regular ten dollar word. How'd this get here?" Adam wheeled on the butler.

"It came special delivery." The fat man had regained some of his poise.

Barron looked at the envelope. "Mailed in Baltimore just as the other one was. I thought that they were to watch that post office."

"Mebbe they did." Adam was calm. "Anyhow we know what to do. You get that money an' I'll give you a check for it." He started toward the door. "I'm goin' to bed," he completed. "There ain't nothin' we can do 'til tomorrow."

Barron began to protest. Adam went straight on to the door. He paused beside the opening, said, "Good night," and went on out.

Waite Barron looked at his father. "Sometimes I think he's——" the young man began.

"Sometimes I know he is," grunted Barron. "Globy, put me through to Mr. Craig in New York immediately. I'll want that money here in the morning."

Globy, the butler, bowed stiffly and went out. Barron scowled at the door. "That bowlegged cowboy treats me like I was a child," he snapped.

Adam Able went to his own room. He found Len Tarpley undressed and in bed on a lounge near a window. The boy was awake. Adam pulled off his coat, hung it on a chair and, sitting down, pulled at a boot."

"I reckon I'll see yore dad tomorrow about you goin' back with me," he said to Len. "You want to, don't you?"

"Yes, sir." The boy was eager.

"We got a mite of work to do here first," continued Adam. "Yore dad used to work here, didn't he?"

"Yes, sir. Mister Barron fired him."

"So I heard," dryly. "He got any friends around here?"

Len said, "Yes," then after thinking a moment, "You don't think my dad was in this do you?"

"Nope. He was drunk from all accounts."

Len's face darkened. "He was," he said shortly.

"That ain't no disgrace." Adam got the boot off. "I been drunk myself. Who'd your dad team around with when he was here?"

"Davis." Len considered. "That's the second man."

"Second man? You mean that blank-faced feller?"

"Yes, sir."

"Huh. Think you'll like punchin' cows?"

"Yes, sir."

The second boot came off. "Well," said Adam, "I'm goin' to see you get a chance to try it. Cowpunchers have to obey orders though."

"I can do that."

"We'll see tomorrow. Good night."

Adam turned out the light. For a minute or two the boy heard him moving about, then the bed creaked and settled with his weight.

IT WAS after twelve when Adam turned in. He lay awake awhile thinking, for despite his apparent sureness and nonchalance, he was worried about Ellen. Too many kidnap victims had been murdered before ever a ransom note was written. There was that possibility, but resolutely Adam Able put the thought from his mind. That note had been too intelligent to have come from an ignorant, murderous beast. With that slight consolation, he went to sleep.

About two he awoke, his mind fully active and his muscles tense. There was a noise, slight in itself, and the sense of some foreign presence in the room. Adam reached under his pillow and the worn walnut butt of his Colt was comforting in his hand. The Colt was a single action with a slip hammer. Adam had tried out the double action guns and liked them, but he couldn't get the speed with one that he would with the slip hammer. Stealthily he shoved out a leg and felt for the floor. Someone moved between his bed and the window. Len Tarpley was on a couch by the window. Adam came out of bed and leaped low across the room. He felt a stiff sleeve, had it twitched from his left hand, then he swung with the Colt. There was a thud and a gasp. With better aim Adam swung the gun again in no half-hearted effort. Again a thud. Adam got a kick on the shins and heard the couch squeak as a weight came down on it. He felt carefully with his free hand, found writhing, unclothed legs and knew that he had hold of Len Tarpley. Adam's left hand followed up the body, felt a tangle of

bed clothes and another body; followed up that and found a head. A short, chopping blow of the Colt and the head was still. Adam reached under the body, put his hand on Len's mouth and then, putting down the Colt, rolled the heavy body that had lain over the boy's head.

"Steady now, son," he commanded. "Don't yell!" Len's struggles ceased. Adam removed his hand and pulled the body clear.

"That's a hand!" he complimented. "You get up an' turn on that little table light, son."

Adam felt the boy get up from the couch and the dim light from the table lamp sent shadows into the room as a switch clicked. Adam, retrieving his Colt, looked at the couch. The blank-faced servant lay there. There was a welt across the man's nose. Evidently Adam's swing had been well aimed. Len came back from the table. The boy trembled with excitement.

"Now what the hell?" said Adam slowly.

Len said, "Davis!"

Adam went to the chair where his clothes were deposited and got his necktie. He did a workmanlike job of tying, looked around for more lashings, and finally took a handkerchief. With that he tied Davis' feet. The man was breathing hard.

"Guess we didn't wake anybody up," said Adam. "What you reckon we better do with this gent?"

The question restored Len's confidence. Adam was so calm that the boy took assurance from his manner. "I don't know," he said, controlling his voice.

Adam ran his hands through the pockets of the livery. There was not a great deal in them. From a waistcoat pocket he pulled a piece of metal and stood examining it.

"Private detective," he said.

Len bent forward. "Was he?" he breathed.

"Yeah." Adam went to his grip, produced another handkerchief, and wadding it, forced Davis' jaws open. He shoved in the handkerchief, thought better of the idea and lashed it around the man's head, holding the jaws apart. There was blood from a scalp wound, on the bed clothes.

"If anybody asks you, you had a nose bleed," Adam informed Len. "Let's get dressed and cache this jasper."

The two dressed silently. Adam had a little trouble with his boots. The boots were tight. Dressed, the man and boy sat down.

"We'll wait till it's comin' light," advised Adam.

"What you goin' to do with him?" questioned the boy.

"Goin' to hide him out awhile," answered Adam. "I want to know what he was doin' over by yore bed."

Len crossed to the bed and pawed the bedclothes. He brought up a knife, heavy bladed and silver in the light. "Look!" he gasped.

"Nice feller," commented Adam. The boy shivered.

"Thought you knew somethin'." Adam spoke half aloud. "Wanted to make sure you wouldn't tell it. This changes my plans some."

Len came over to Adam and stood close beside him.

"Darn good thing I took my gun to bed with me," said Adam. "It's a habit I got."

THERE was silence. The man on the bed, gradually reviving, twisted and his groan was faint through the gag.

"We got to get him out of here," said Adam. "Listen. You scout down the hall apiece."

Len, concealing his fright, went out the door. He came back within five minutes. "Nobody up," he said. "I went clear to the front door."

"Good boy." Adam walked over to the couch and collared the man lying there. "Can you ease his feet along?" he asked.

Len nodded.

Adam pulled the man off the bed and towing him, dragged him to the door.

They had trouble going down the stair. There was a dim light in the hall from a night light. Len eased Davis' feet down

the steps to keep them from bumping. Adam was small but he had spent most of his life handling cattle. He knew how to manage a dead weight. They got the man out the door and leaving it open, pulled him out across the driveway.

"Now where?" questioned Adam. "I don't know my way around here. I wish it would light up."

"There's a tool house at the end of the garden," suggested Len.

"Locked?"

"I don't know."

"It's a bet anyhow." Adam resumed his tugging.

Len led the way. They dragged Davis, kicking a little now, along a cement walk, across a lawn, and Len stopped. Adam released his hold and joined the boy. The tool house was locked. Adam pulled the Colt from his waistband and gave Len matches. "Light up," he said. A match flamed.

Adam got the muzzle of the Colt under a hasp and pried. The screws pulled loose with a little clatter. Adam opened the door, went back and pulled Davis into the shed.

"Beauty about this kind of gun," he said as he closed the door. "You can pry with 'em an' they'll still shoot. There ain't no sights to hurt, an' the barrel's stout."

Len, trembling with excitement, lit another match. Adam closed the door, pushed back the screws and stepped back.

"If somebody don't want a shovel he'll keep all right," he announced. "Let's go back."

They retraced their steps. A streak of light was showing in the east. They went back through the door, closed it, and went upstairs. In Adam's bed room Len sat down. His face was white.

"Scared kid?" asked Adam.

Len nodded.

"No need to be." Adam got out the makings. "That feller was mixed up in kidnappin' Ellen. I reckon he underestimated you an' me a little."

The inclusion of the boy straightened his figure. He managed to grin.

"I reckon," Adam drawled, watching the effect of his words, "that we'll teach these fellers not to monkey with a cowpuncher."

Len swelled visibly.

"I'll have to get you one of them guns," Adam went on. "One of them, an' a saddle an' some boots. You could use 'em."

Len came over and stood beside Adam. "Honest?" he said.

"Sure as shootin'."

The boy's eyes were bright. He had forgotten the fright of a moment before.

"Where is your ranch?" he asked.

Adam blew a thin stream of smoke from the corner of his mouth. "New Mexico," he said. "I'll tell you."

HIS steady, monotonous drawl fascinated the boy. Adam talked quietly. He wanted to keep Len just the way he was. Adam had use for the boy. With half his mind he concentrated on recent events; with the other half he painted a picture of cow punching for Len Tarpley. He talked for two hours.

About five o'clock, Adam ceased suddenly. "Let's you an' me take a walk," he suggested.

Len rose willingly. The two left the room. Downstairs they found the house beginning to stir. A sleepy maid was working in the hall. Adam said, "Good mornin'," as they passed her. They went out.

On the lawn a dour faced man was moving a hose. Adam drawled "Good mornin'," again and stopped to watch the procedure.

The gardener grunted, put down the sprinkler and turned on the water.

Adam watched the spray. "Quite a job you got," he said, making conversation.

The gardener, a Scotchman, growled, "Aye."

"Have much trouble with bugs?" Adam inquired.

"None to speak of."

"That's good. You got any ants around here? They're hard to kill."

The gardener sensed a kindred spirit. "I use cyanide on 'em," he said, brushing his hands against his overalls. "They come in from the road though, an' they're hard to kill."

"Sure enough," agreed Adam. "We're just out walkin'. Come on Len."

The boy followed Adam down the drive.

The gates were closed and locked. A man came from a small house beside them and, at Adam's behest, opened a wicket. Adam and Len went out on the road. They walked several hundred yards and Adam stopped. In the grass beside the road there was a bare spot. Adam took off his hat, walked over and kicked the ant hill in the center of the bare spot. Ants boiled out, big red and black fellows. Adam grinned. He looked at the ants, looked at his hat, and shook his head. An idea struck him and he pulled out a tobacco sack, emptied it and cautiously, working at the edge of the ant hill, got a clod of dirt and about a hundred of the black and red warriors into the sack. Sucking his thumb, for he had been bitten once, he returned to the watching boy.

"Let's go back," he said.

They went back through the open wicket and toward the house. The gardener was gone. Adam nodded toward the house.

"You go back in an' clean up," he suggested. "I'll be back in a little."

Len said, "Yes, sir," lingered a moment and departed. He was filled with curiosity but he obeyed orders. Adam grinned after the boy and, turning, set out for the tool house.

The door of the tool house opened easily. Adam closed it behind him. Davis lay on the floor, his eyes open and malevolent.

"Mornin'," greeted Adam. "What was you doin' in my room?"

Davis tried to speak and couldn't because of the gag. He managed an inarticulate, mouthing sound.

"Damn' fool question," said Adam. "You wanted to kill the boy. Thought he knew somethin'. He don't. You know somethin' an' yo're goin' to tell me!"

Davis did not move.

"I want to know where Ellen is," rasped Adam. "Goin' to tell?"

Davis shook his head.

ADAM pulled out the Colt, glanced ruefully at the scars on the muzzle and, bending down, untied the gag.

Davis swore viciously. "Let me go!" he demanded. "I'm a private detective. Mister Barron hired me. You'll——"

Adam's hand across his mouth, stopped the words.

"You're in on takin' Ellen," said Adam. "You know where she is. Goin' to tell me?" He removed his hand.

"I don't know. Barron hired me to protect the house. You'll get hell for this!"

Adam straightened up, put his boot across Davis's mouth and brought out the tobacco sack. Davis twisted his head from beneath the boot.

"You'll tell me," said Adam grimly. He bent down, opened Davis's waistcoat, shirt and underclothes. Holding them open he pulled at the sack with his teeth, got the drawstring loose and shoved the sack against Davis's belly, closing the clothing.

"In about a minute you'll be damn' glad to talk," prophesied Adam.

Davis squirmed, then yelped suddenly. Adam was ready with the handkerchief. He shoved it into Davis's mouth and held it there despite the man's squirmings. A big red and black ant took hold and Davis's body leaped convulsively.

"Goin' to tell?" snapped Adam.

Davis squirmed. Adam held in the gag and waited. "I know where there's a whole hill of them fellers," he said. "You'll talk or I'll take you out there an' stake you down on it, so help me. Goin' to tell?"

Davis managed to move his head in affirmation. Adam pulled out the gag.

"Take those damn' ants off me!" Davis was still trying. "I tell you—— Ouch! My Lord!"

Adam put his foot on Davis's belly and shoved hard. Disturbed ants bit viciously. Davis yelped.

"I'll take you out an' stake you to that ant hill an' put honey in yore mouth." Adam's voice was hard. "Know what they'll do? They start with yore tongue an' then work down yore throat. I seen a man once that the Apaches had done that to. We shot him to put him out of his misery. You goin' to talk?"

"I'll talk if you'll get those ants off me."

"Talk first."

"I don't know where she is. I'm just planted here to see what Barron does. My God!"

"What you supposed to do when he sends the money?" Adam was inflexible.

"I've got to phone to Dreher when the boy leaves with the money. That's all I'm supposed to do."

"What was the kid's dad goin' to do?"

"Hell, nothing! Dreher wouldn't monkey with a drunk like him."

"Just goin' to use him for bait, huh? Come on! What was he supposed to do?"

"We were going to plant some money on him."

"Get him hung, huh? Who's Dreher?"

"Bugs Dreher. He's the big man."

"Where you goin' to phone him?"

"He'll kill me!"

"Hell, I'll kill yuh! Where you goin' to phone him?"

"Acosta nine six six. I don't know where it is."

"You don't know where Ellen is?"

"I've told you I don't know. Take these damn' ants off me!"

ADAM stooped down and unbuttoned waistcoat and shirt full length. "I'll take 'em off now," he said. "I reckon I'll need you." He busied himself over Davis's body, crushing ants between his fingers.

"Mebbe that ain't all of 'em," he announced straightening. "I'll leave the others to keep you from gettin' lonesome." He pulled the handkerchief from Davis's feet, jerked the man up and shoved the Colt into his back. "Start for the house!" he commanded.

Davis, with Adam prodding him from time to time, walked across the grass and up the cement path. At the door of the house the fat butler, Golby, coatless, and his face red with anger, met them at the door.

"Where have you been, Davis," he snapped. "I've looked for you——"

Adam pushed Davis past the angry butler. "You go get Barron!" he commanded. "Send him up to my room."

Golby saw the gun in Davis's back, gasped, and wheeling, went down the hall at a trot. Adam pushed Davis along up the stairs. "Might have left you in my room," he growled. "It would of saved a lot of pullin'."

Davis said nothing.

Len Tarpley was in Adam's room. He had just come from the bath and his face was shining with soap and water. His hair was sticking out in all directions. Adam shoved Davis toward a chair and the man fell into it.

"Comb yore hair, kid, an' get on out," directed Adam. "I'll be with you in a shake."

Len combed his hair, put on his sweater, and went out the door. He had hardly closed it before Barron swung it open again. Barron was in pajamas, slippers and bathrobe. His face was red with anger.

"What the hell does this mean, Able?" he snapped. "Golby said you brought Davis into the house and that you had a gun stuck in his back. I hired Davis three months ago. He's a private detective."

"He ain't so damn' private," drawled Adam. "Last night he come slippin' in here with that knife, lookin' for the Tarpley kid."

Barron glanced toward the bed and saw the knife there. His face lost some of its color.

"I woke up an' batted his ears down some," drawled Adam. "Then him an' me had a session. Seems like he's workin' for a feller named Bugs Dreher. Dreher has got Ellen."

"My God!" Barron gasped. "You sure of this, Able?"

"Ask him," said Adam.

Barron looked at Davis. Davis's face was a sullen acknowledgment of Adams's accusation.

Barron started for the door. "I'll phone to Claiborn," he said. "I'll——"

"Come back here!" snapped Adam.

Barron turned slowly. His eyebrows met above his angry blue eyes. "What do you mean?" he demanded. "You can't order me around like that!"

"You sound like a kid," said Adam.

"I've stood all I'm going to stand from you," snorted Barron. "You've taken too much on yourself! You——"

"Hell! I ain't started." Adam came to his feet now. "Who was it bellyachin' about gettin' the police off this case? Now, the first thing that happens you want to run to 'em! Set down!"

Barron took one step and then stopped. "We have to call the police," he said. "The law——"

"You've got too much law! Set down, I said!"

Barron sat down. "What do you intend to do?" he asked, his voice trembling with anger.

ADAM took two steps and stopped before Barron. The butt of the Colt peeped out from under his vest where he had shoved the weapon. A thin grin formed on his lips but his eyes were cold.

"Why," he said, "I'm goin' to pay fifty thousand dollars ransom for Ellen. That's what I'm goin' to do."

"But this man! We ought to call Claiborn. He can tell us where they have Ellen. He can——"

"All he can do right now is set!" Adam interrupted. "Looky here, Barron. Yo're hell bent for the law right now, ain't you?"

"We have police for just such things," Barron gathered himself. "You know——"

"I know quite a lot about Rufus Barron." Adam's grin grew a trifle. "The difference between you an' me, Barron, is that you always had somebody make the laws you wanted made, an' I've always made 'em myself."

"What do you mean?"

"Well," said Adam, "when you wanted somethin' you'd send word to yore pet senator or state representative an' the legislature would handle it for you. When I wanted somethin' I generally had to go take it."

"Aren't you going to call Claiborn?"

"No! Damn it! I brung my own law with me!"

"You mean you——"

"It's been good in sev'ral states," said Adam. "You throwin' in with me?"

"You're goin' to——?"

"Oh hell!" said Adam. "You got any red blood in you? You game at all?"

Barron's face was almost scarlet. "Of course I'm game!" he snapped. "Are you trying to call me yellow?"

Adam chuckled. "That's a boy!" he complimented. "You made lots of laws yore way an' I made several my way. This time we'll throw in together. Listen: this feller is supposed to 'phone his boss when Waite leaves with the money. I want him to make that phone call."

Barron nodded. He had calmed considerably.

"I ain't goin' to have the police in this." said Adam. "I want the personal satisfaction of watchin' the fellers kick. Ellen's all I got."

"I can understand that." Barron nodded again.

"He's goin' to phone Acosta nine six six. Know where that is?"

"No, but we can find out."

"Good! We got several things to find out. Is that money comin'?"

"It will be here this morning."

"Good again. Now listen. Have you got a feller you can trust, somebody besides Waite, that will watch this bird?"

Barron considered. "Golby," he suggested finally. "He's been with me for years. I think——"

"A weak vessel but better'n none at all,"

Adam interrupted. "Let's call him in an' go eat. You get Golby a gun from yore ars'nal. Get him a shotgun!"

Barron was beginning to get something of Adam's spirit. He got up. "I'll send him in here," he said.

"Good," Adam told him. "You'll have to loan me a necktie, too, an' a couple of handkerchiefs. "Mine are bein' used."

BARRON left the room. Adam sat down and looked sardonically at Davis. "So you was just goin' to plant a little money on Tarpley an' use him for a goat, was you?" he said, striking off at a tangent. "I got other ideas."

"What will I get out of this if I do what you want me to?" Davis's voice was hoarse.

"You might not get shot," said Adam gently. "Hell! I hate a skunk like you! So you sold Old Man Barron out?"

Davis made no reply. Adam went on. "You know," he said, "I ain't so sure that you told all you knowed."

Davis was sullen. Golby, without knocking, opened the door and came in. The butler carried a shotgun and apparently was somewhat familiar with the weapon. He also dangled a pair of handcuffs from one hand.

"We found these in Davis's effects, sir," he said, holding out the cuffs.

"Find a gun, too?" questioned Adam.

"Yes, sir."

Adam took the cuffs. "Got the key?" he asked.

"Yes, sir." Golby proffered it.

Adam laid the cuffs down and began a systematic search of Davis's pockets. He brought out everything he found, put the articles on the table, and then, stepping around behind the man, ordered him to get up. Davis rose. Adam marched him over to a straight backed chair, made him sit in it, and then snapped the handcuffs around his wrists and the round in the back of the chair.

"That'll hold you," he said. "Watch him Golby."

Golby said, "Yes, sir," and sat down, training the shotgun on Davis. Adam looked things over to be sure that all was right, and then went out. He walked to Barron's den, went in, and waited. Barron was dressing in the next room.

"Be with you in a minute," he said.

"I'd like to borrow a necktie," announced Adam.

Barron came out presently with a necktie and handkerchief which he gave to Adam. As Adam arranged the tie, Barron looked at him quizzically.

"What would you have done if I hadn't agreed with you?" he asked suddenly.

ADAM considered. "I was mad," he said. "Likely I'd of put a gun on you, tied you up, an' locked you in."

"You wouldn't have got far," said Barron.

Adam nodded. "Likely not," he agreed.

"We'll eat breakfast," said Barron.

"Don't say nothin' to yore boy about this," cautioned Adam. "This is yore party an' mine."

Barron grinned. "Haven't you any inhibitions?" he asked.

Adam grinned back. "Not a one," he said cheerfully.

Waite was in the dining room. He greeted both men. The boy's face was drawn and haggard. Evidently he had not slept. "I thought I heard someone moving around last night," he said.

"That was me early this mornin'," replied Adam. "Livin' on a ranch learns you to get up early. Where's the Tarpley kid?"

"He's eating breakfast with the servants."

Adam frowned. If the boy talked concerning last night's happenings—— Then his face smoothed again. Len Tarpley was not talkative. If he did talk it would be about his impending trip to New Mexico. Adam knew that the boy was filled with that.

After breakfast Waite went to his room and Barron and Adam strolled out into

the garden. Barron, puffing a cigar, looked askance at his companion. "How did you make Davis talk, Able?" he asked.

"Huh?" said Adam. "Oh. I introduced him to some ants."

"Ants?"

"Yeah. Big red an' black ones."

"I don't understand."

"You would if you ever had one bite you."

Barron puffed again. "I'm having that phone number looked up."

"Havin' Claiborn do it?"

"No. I telephoned to Baltimore. Acosta is a Baltimore exchange."

"How far is Baltimore?"

"About fifty miles."

"I reckon we'll have to go in there."

Barron nodded. "Do you think Ellen is held there?" he asked.

Adam shook his head. "No," he answered. "They've sent their notes from there but I don't think she's in town."

"Why not?"

"That's where Dreher is goin' to be."

"I believe you're right," Barron threw away his half smoked cigar. "You know who Dreher is, of course?"

"No."

"He's quite a fellow from all accounts. The police in Baltimore have him listed as Public Enemy Number One."

"Been a bootlegger?"

"Yes."

"He'll be hangin' around where he's known, on account of this," said Adam wisely. "When they deliver the money though, he'll be on deck."

"Do you mind telling me why you talked to that Associated Press man the way you did?" Barron was curious.

"That was part of a scheme I had," confessed Adam. "I figgered that if they knew they could get more money they'd hold Ellen an' we could trace the second payment."

"Suppose they kill the girl?"

"If they was goin' to do that they'd already of done it," Adam was blunt. "Mebbe they have but I won't believe that. What I got schemed is that they're holdin' her an' when that blab of mine comes out in the papers it'll make 'em sore. They'll have fifty thousand an' they'll think they

can get fifty more. They'll hold her an' they'll all be together."

"Then you think we can make a complete roundup?"

ADAM looked at Barron approvingly. "That's just what I think."

"You're exposing Ellen to more danger.

"I know it, but Ellen's game."

"Still we should have more men. Suppose that there are five or six of them?"

Adam looked at Barron. "This here is my own personal rat killin'," he said. "If you don't want to go to the party——"

"I thought we'd settled all that." Barron flushed. "I was just bringing up some points that I thought you might not have considered."

"Hell!" Adam spoke slowly. "I considered a lot of things. There's too many damn' slips in the law back here, Barron. Too many of these fellers get out. It ain't so bad since the Federal Government took hold, but I don't see where they can figger in this. I don't believe Ellen's been took across no state line."

"And you still want to go ahead?"

"I got to go ahead," Adam almost groaned. "Hell! She's my girl! I got to see her safe out of this."

"Why don't you just pay the ransom? Pay a hundred thousand if you have to. They'll send her back."

"If I could be sure of that I might." Adam's voice was low. "I might even leave them devils to get somebody else, but I cain't be sure they'll turn her loose. I got to get her myself, an' if anything's happened to her I got to get them!"

Barron nodded understandingly. "I know how you feel," he said.

"Let's do somethin'." Adam changed the subject abruptly. "We got time to kill, ain't we?"

"Until we hear from the telephone manager at Baltimore and we get the money from New York. What would you like to do?"

Adam thought a moment. "I'd kind of like to sight in that rifle of yours," he said finally.

Barron looked at the smaller man, hesitated, and then nodded. "So would I," he said grimly.

Barron had installed a rifle range well away from the big stone mansion, and there, accompanied by Len Tarpley, the two men spent most of the morning. Waite Barron did not join them. Adam was sorry for Waite, but he didn't want the young fellow around, not at the moment. Waite was too miserable, too wrapped up in his own troubles, and every time Adam looked at him he recalled what might have happened to Ellen. Adam had about a full load without borrowing from Waite.

Just before noon Adam and Barron were summoned from the rifle range by a message that the money had arrived. A big armored car from Baltimore had brought the currency. With the car had come several State Police troopers, a special bank guard, and Barron's office manager who had flown down from New York. A number of reporters had followed the car to the gate of the Barron estate, but had stopped there. Barron had given strict orders that reporters were not to be admitted.

Claiborn was on hand with the police, but Barron, taking charge of the situation as always, informed the policemen that they would not be admitted.

"We don't want any hitch in this," he growled. "There will be no marked bills or listing of numbers. We are acting in good faith and we want the men who have Ellen Lassel to know it."

Accordingly Claiborn and his men left the house and returned to the road. Barron disappeared into the house with Craig and the bank messenger, and Adam, collecting Waite and Len Tarpley, followed the policemen toward the gate. He caught up with Claiborn before they reached the entrance, and drew the police captain aside.

"Lissen here," he said earnestly. "You said you wasn't goin' to interfere with us deliverin' the money. That's been published in the papers."

"We aren't going to interfere," said Claiborn impatiently. "Is that any reason we should be kept in the dark about things? You've had word as to how to send the ransom. We know that a special delivery letter came last night. Now you come clean with me."

"Let's go down to the gate," requested Adam. "I want to do all *my* talkin' at once."

Claiborn agreed sullenly and the three men and the boy went on. There were reporters at the gate. They grouped around Adam and Waite when they came out, and the air was filled with questions.

Adam held up his hand. "I got somethin' to say," he announced when quiet had been restored, "an' I want you all to listen to it. We got a letter last night about deliverin' the money. I ain't goin' to tell you how it's to be delivered an' I want you to give me yore words that anybody that leaves here won't be followed. Ellen's safety depends on that. Have I got it?"

There were nods and words of assent.

"Then I'll tell you this," continued Adam. "We're not takin' the numbers of the bills an' we're not markin' any of 'em. We're just goin' to pay the ransom. As soon as we get Ellen back I'll promise you fellers that you'll have all her story. Is that fair?"

THE men about the gate agreed that Adam's proposition was just.

Fellows, the young AP man, reached Adam's side. "We'll not follow anyone, Mr. Able," he said, "and we'll play fair with you. There's just one thing I want you to agree to. I want *your* story of the kidnapping besides the girl's."

Adam looked at the thin faced youngster, grinned slowly, and bent toward him. "If you get it you'll have to be there," he said. "Want in?"

Fellows nodded, his eyes narrow slits.

"If you got a car you come back pretty quick," advised Adam, low voiced. "Don't be in any hurry to get this news to yore paper."

"If you gyp me——" began Fellows, then noting Adam's face, he nodded again. "I'll be here," he said.

Claiborn stepped to Adam's side as Fellows stepped away. "You're holding out on me, Able," he said. "I promised you that I'd coöperate. I've followed up every lead that we could get. I've——"

"I didn't promise you nothin'," interrupted Adam. "I'll tell you this, Claiborn. I got a hunch that the Tarpley kid's dad is worth watchin'. That's all I can tell you."

Claiborn looked narrowly at Adam. "I think you'll be worth watching!" he snapped. "Damn me if I don't do it, too!"

Adam wheeled slowly. "He'p yorese'f," he invited over his shoulder.

With Waite and Len he walked back toward the house. Half way up the drive he stopped. "Len," he said suddenly, "I wisht you was bowlegged."

At the house Barron was waiting for the three. The big man was impatient. Adam took him aside and told him of the conversation at the gate, and what Claiborn had said. Barron's face was glum. "He'll do it, too," he said.

"Mebbe," agreed Adam. "You phone down to the gate an' tell 'em to let Fellows in. I want him."

"What for?"

"Him an' me are goin' to run a errand."

"What am I supposed to do? Sit here and hold my own hands?"

"I reckon, for awhile."

"I want to show you a paper!" Barron was angry. "Craig brought several from the city. Come in here."

He led Adam into the hall, picked up a paper from the stand, and shoved it at Adam. Blazoned across the page was a headline.

"ABLE SAYS KIDNAPPERS ARE PIKERS

Men Who Kidnapped Ellen Lassel Could Have Had One Hundred Thousand"

Adam looked pleased. "That Fellows is sure on the job, ain't he?" he commented.

Barron grunted. "Call it on the job if you want to," he said.

"I'm goin' upstairs an' see how that Davis feller's keepin'," announced Adam. "Len," lifting his voice, "you come on."

Len Tarpley moved away from Waite Barron and joined Adam. Together they ascended the stair.

IN ADAM'S room they found Golby keeping faithful watch, and Davis, his eyes smouldering sullenly, still on his chair. "How's he been?" Adam asked the butler.

"He tried to bribe me, sir!" Golby's voice carried a shocked note. "He offered me five thousand dollars to let him go."

"Did huh?" Adam strode over to the captive. "You got five thousand?" he asked.

Davis made no reply and Adam grinned thinly, with no mirth. "Keep it," he advised. "Yo're goin' to need it."

"Golby," he turned to the butler again, "whose clothes can I wear around here?"

Golby was surprised. He hesitated a moment before answering. "I believe you could wear the gardener's, sir," he said. "I think——"

"You go get me a suit an' a hat. Most anything'll do. I'll watch awhile."

Golby rose, set down the shotgun, and went out. Adam settled into a chair and stared steadily at Davis.

In perhaps fifteen minutes Golby returned, carrying a brown suit over his arm and a hat and shoes in his hands. Adam took the clothes.

"Thanks," he said. "I'll turn yore job back to you. Come on, Len."

With the boy in tow he left the room and went to Barron's den. Barron, Waite, and Craig were there. Adam came in, sat down and began to pull at a boot.

"This is a cockeyed nuisance," he announced. Barron looked at Adam and the small man jerked his head toward the door. Barron rose.

"Suppose we go and look at your car, Waite," he said. "You'll want some lunch, too, Craig."

Waite and Craig followed the elder Barron out of the room.

Adam undressed rapidly. "Put on these clothes, Len," he commanded when he had stripped to his underwear.

The boy, mystified, obeyed. Adam began to don the suit Golby had brought. It fitted fairly well. When he was clothed he looked at Len. Adam's clothes bagged on the boy, but the heels of the boots raised his stature. Adam judged that he would do.

"Listen," he said. "Pretty soon, now, I want you to go out an' start down the drive. You go a little ways an' then break for the fence. Keep goin'. You'll be caught but that's all right. When you're caught don't say nothin'."

"What——?" began the boy.

"You said you'd obey orders," interrupted the little man. "It'll be Captain Claiborn that'll ketch you an' he'll be mad. Think you can do it?"

"Yes, sir," said Len firmly.

"That's good," Adam nodded. "You'll make a puncher, Len."

BARRON came in and stopped short. "What is this? A masquerade?" he snapped.

"Nope," Adam replied, "I just want to shake Claiborn. Get the idea?"

"No, I don't."

"Len an' me'll show you. Say, Barron, when's Waite goin' to start?"

"Just at three."

Adam glanced at his watch. It was one one o'clock. He frowned. "You got to hold him till three-thirty," he said. "I wonder what's keepin' Fellows."

"Why do I have to hold Waite?"

"To give me time. Now get this: at three-thirty that Davis bird has got to phone Acosta nine six six. He's got to say that Waite's left an' that he's got the money an' that's all."

"Well?" questioned Barron, scowling.

"Have you got the place where that number is?"

"Yes. It's——"

"You tell Fellows. By Gosh! I wonder why he don't come!"

Adam took two restless steps. There were sounds outside the door and Barron opened it. Fellows, accompanied by a maid, was in the hall.

"Come in," snapped Adam.

Fellows entered. Barron closed the door. "I had to shake a bunch——" began Fellows.

"N'mind!" Adam's voice was harsh. "Tell him where that place is, Barron."

"The Prideall Drugstore. A booth. It's on——"

"I know where it is," said Fellows. "There's only one in Baltimore."

"That's where we're goin'," snapped Adam. "Len, you start now!" Len got up and moved toward the door. "Hurry kid!" said Adam. Len went out.

There was silence for ten minutes. Barran paced up and down. Fellows sat, staring at Adam. Adam rose suddenly.

"You be at the gate, Barron," he said. "Take that slick shootin' rifle an' have a car an' be there just as soon as that feller phones. We'll either come for you or we'll call you."

"But——" began Barron.

Adam whirled to Fellows. "Come on,"

he snapped. "Take me to that Prideall Drug Store."

With Fellows at his heels they plunged down the stairs. Barron called after them but they did not stop. Fellows's car was on the drive. He got in and started the motor. Adam piled in beside him.

"Shake it up," said Adam. "Damn, but I hope Len made it!"

Fellows turned the car and it purred down the drive. At the gate he turned west. A startled trooper, on duty at the

gate, jumped aside. Adam crouched low in the seat. Two hundred yards from the gate he looked back. There were men on the road.

"Hurry!" he begged Fellows. Fellows's foot went down. Adam, looking back, could see the men leave the road and go to the fence. There were uniforms in the crowd. Len had decoyed Claiborn! Fellows turned right at the cross road.

"There's another through highway two miles north," he said. "Maybe you'd better tell me about this."

"Not now," replied Adam. "You'd just hinder me. Do you know a feller named Dreher?"

Fellows whistled softly. "Is he the bird?" he snapped.

"I reckon," agreed Adam.

FELLOWS whistled again. "Listen to me," he said. "We'd better turn around and go back and get Claiborn and about ten cops. Dreher is tough."

Adam slid his Colt out into his lap. "Let's go to town," he said tonelessly.

Fellows, glancing down, saw the Colt. "We go to town," he said. "I won't say anything more about the cops, Mister Able."

"That's fine," said Adam.

Fellows could drive. The car rolled down the road effortlessly but the speedometer hovered between sixty and seventy. At the outskirts of the city Fellows slowed.

"The Prideall isn't very far," he said. "What do you want me to do?"

"Stop at the curb an' see if you can spot Dreher or one of his men comin' out."

"What about you?"

"I'll be inside."

"What will you do if we miss him?"

"We ain't goin' to miss him."

Fellows said nothing. A light turned against them and he stopped. Adam fidgeted.

"Next block," announced Fellows.

It was a quarter past three o'clock when Fellows parked the car beside the curb. Opposite them was the plate glass windows of the Prideall Drug Store. Adam crawled out. "This is shavin' it," he said. "Better be ready to go."

Fellows nodded. Adam went into the store.

There weren't many people inside. At the rear, next the prescription counter, were two phone booths. Adam went back. One booth was marked, "Out of Order." Adam went into the other. The number on the phone was Acosta Eleven Three Five. Adam closed the door and busied himself with a directory. He looked up the number of Barron's home. He had forgotten to ask Barron. Having looked up the number, he stalled. Dropping a nickel he listened while a voice answered at the number he had called, then he hung up. He came out of the booth hot. The booth had been stuffy. As Adam came out, a hard faced man entered it. He glanced at Adam. Adam went out toward the front and stopped at the fountain. Another man was entering the booth marked "Out of Order." Adam ordered a malted milk and watched the attendant mix it. Leisurely he sipped his drink.

Back in the rear a phone rang shrilly,

Adam finished the malted milk, picked up his check and went over to the cashier's desk. While he paid the girl the hard faced man and another came from the rear of the store and went on out. Adam collected his change and walked out. Fellows's car was gone!

Adam walked to the corner, watched the hard faced man and his companion climb into a big Packard. The Packard slid away. Adam swore beneath his breath. Fellows's car pulled up at the crossing and the door opened. Adam jumped for it, hit the cushion and Fellows started, beating the light a fraction.

"I saw them come in," said the AP man. "They saw me too. I know Dreher. I pulled around the block."

Adam said, "Good boy!"

Fellows let two cars slide in between his coupe and the Packard, and held the distance. "Right out the Post Road," he said.

THE Post Road was fairly clear of traffic. The two rocked past Bar B Q stands and filling stations, following the black Packard. The occupants of the Packard were in a hurry. Still, as Fellows told Adam there was no need of crowding them. "These redhots look back," said Fellows. "We don't want them to get excited."

Adam agreed. Now that he was on the way he was tense with excitement. "Listen," he said, when they were well away from town. "Can you pass these fellers?"

Fellows said that he could. "The way they're traveling now, anyhow," he amended.

"Want to try it?" suggested Adam. "I want to phone Barron."

Fellows objected. "We might lose them," he said.

"We might at that," Adam agreed. "Still, I'd like to phone."

Fellows considered. "I don't believe you had better try it," he said finally.

Adam sat back on the seat. "All right," he said. "This is yore game."

There was silence in the coupe. Almost a mile ahead the Packard rolled along smoothly. Adam never took his eyes from the car.

"That was Benny Hensted with Dreher," said Fellows suddenly.

"What does that spell?"

"A real tough gent." Fellows's lips quirked.

"So?" said Adam.

Fellows stepped down and picked up distance a little. "Looks as though it would be late when the boys get in," he commented.

"We got three four hours yet." Adam took his eyes from the car ahead and squinted out the window. When he turned back the car ahead had turned. Fellows slowed down.

"If we go right after them they'll spot us," he said.

"If we don't we'll lose 'em."

They reached the cross roads. Fellows slowed more. "That goes down to the shore," he announced.

Adam squinted after the black car. Fellows stopped. "It's all yours, now," he said.

Adam gestured toward a filling station. "Reckon we can phone?" he asked.

"Sure."

"You watch 'em. I'll phone Barron." Adam got out.

In four or five minutes he returned. "I told Barron where we were," he said. "See where they went?"

"Right straight ahead."

Adam climbed in the coupe. "So'll we."

Fellows started the car down the side road. It was of shell mixed with sand. The tires churned on it. A low rise came gradually toward them. Just below the brow of the rise, Adam told Fellows to stop. When the car ceased its motion he got out and walked up the hill, turned and ran back.

"Still goin'," he said.

Fellows grinned admiringly. "Where did you learn that?" he asked.

"Just around. Come up over the hill

fast, an' slow when you hit the bottom."

Fellows obeyed orders. As they rolled down the slope he glanced at Adam. "See where the road went?" he questioned.

"Straight ahead."

Fellows let the car loiter along.

There were farms on either side of the road, but the black car did not stop. It could barely be seen ahead, just a speck now, its identity uncertain. Suddenly the speck disappeared. Fellows shoved the throttle down. The coupe leaped.

THEY reached the place where the black car had turned. The road was little traveled, leading off toward the north and east. Adam motioned for Fellows to stop.

"We'll wait here," he said calmly.

"We'll lose them."

"No we won't. This here is the end of it. This road just goes one place."

"How do you know?"

"I've seen a many like it."

Fellows killed the motor.

They waited. Half an hour went by, three quarters of an hour. Adam shifted uneasily. "Mebbe we better go on," he began. "If somethin's delayed Barron ——"

Fellows looked back. "A car just came over the hill," he said.

"That's him." Adam sighed contentedly.

The car came on apace. Behind the coupe it drew to a halt and Barron, red faced and hatless, piled out. "Where are they?" he demanded.

"Down the road," said Adam. "Get in."

Barron went back to his own car and returned carrying the scope sighted rifle. He looked at Fellows.

"Maybe Mr. Fellows won't want to——" he said.

"I've come this far," interrupted Fellows. "I'm not going back now."

"Let's get started," said Adam.

Barron climbed into the coupe. Adam reached across him and closed the door. Fellows piloted the car down the road. The road twisted and turned. It was all sand now. Ahead they could catch an occasional glimmer of blue water. Fellows pushed on clutch and brake suddenly. The coupe stopped. Ahead was a hillock of sand covered with beach grass. Barron jerked open the door and got out. Adam followed him and then, passing Barron, climbed the hillock. At the top he dropped down. There, perhaps three hundred yards away was a small building with two outbuildings close beside it. The sand stretched away in front of it to end in water that lapped uneasily. Beside the house was the black Packard. Barron dropped down beside Adam, the rifle in front of him. They heard Fellows pant as he ran up the slope and stopped.

"Get down," said Adam.

Fellows dropped and crawled forward.

BARRON slid the rifle up until the butt nestled against his shoulder and squinted through the sights. "Nice thing about a telescope," he grunted. "It picks up plenty of light."

Adam, lying beside him, said nothing and Fellows, catching the spirit of the occasion, asked a question. "Are you fellows going to try this alone?" he asked.

"I reckon," said Adam.

Fellows moved beside him and Adam took his eyes from the house, backgrounded by the still waters of the bay, and looked at the AP man. Fellows had produced a compact and chunky revolver from his person.

Adam's eyes squinted. "You buyin' chips?" he demanded.

Fellows mimicked Adam's tone. "I reckon."

"It's my party," warned Adam. "I run it."

"OK," returned Fellows.

The three lay motionless on the hillock. Barron restrained his impatience and Fellows, having declared himself, said nothing more. Adam to whom time was nothing, sized up the ground and the house and sheds.

"They ain't all there yet," he said presently.

"How do you know?" Barron asked the question.

"Ought to be two cars. One with the money."

"It's coming now," said Fellows.

They could hear a car churning through the sand. It came from the direction oposite them. Presently it lifted into sight, a small dark colored coupe.

"Now when they get set——" said Adam.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to slide down there. Barron, I'm countin' on you not to let anybody come out of that house from the front. Think you can stop 'em?"

"I could, but I'm not going to. I'm going with you!"

"An' cramp my style an' get yorese'f shot? Not by a damn' sight! When I go in there I'm goin' by myse'f. I'll have enough trouble lookin' out for Ellen, let alone havin' to watch for you!"

"Where do I come in?" This was Fellows.

Adam scrutinized the reporter again. "If yo're sure enough buyin' in, you can slip down an' watch them sheds when the excitement starts," he said.

Fellows nodded.

The small coupe had stopped and a man got out followed by another. They went toward the house. The first man was carrying a small satchel. Barron moved to the right six feet or more. The coupe, in stopping, had partially masked the door from his view.

"Now listen," said Adam. "Get this right an' get it straight: I go by myse'f. I'm goin' now. In just about fifteen minutes I want you, Barron, to slap a shot into the door jamb. When you shoot I'm goin' in."

"I still think I ought to go with you."

"You'd be shot before you was half way there an' we'd all lose out," Adam refused the aid. "So long boys; I'll be seein' you."

HE SLID toward the edge of the hillock, moved slowly toward a greening tuft of tall grass and, sheltered by that, wormed his way into a microscopic fold of sand. Despite his deliberate movements he made speed. Barron and Fellows watching him, marveled at the ease with which he chose shelter and moved to it. Again Adam slid forward. There was a sound from the house as a man opened the door, looked out and closed it again. The noise distracted the attention of the two on the hillock. When they looked back toward where they had last seen Adam Able he had disappeared!

"Fifteen minutes," muttered Barron and pulled out his watch. A fine sweat broke out on his forehead. Fellows looked down the slope choosing the straightest path toward the sheds. He glanced at his own watch on his wrist. The second hand seemed to crawl around.

Five of Adam's fifteen minutes were gone when another noise was heard by the two on the knoll. There was a car coming. They tensed and watched it lift into sight. It, too, was a coupe, and small. The car stopped, a man jumped out and ran toward the house. As he ran, a motorcycle with a side car, spurted over the sand. Barron, who was squinting through his telescope mouthed a curse.

"That's Tarpley!" he snarled. "That's the damn——"

"Who are the others?" snapped Fellows.

Barron shifted the telescope sight toward the motorcycle. He swore again. "Claiborn and another policeman!" he answered Fellows. "If they——"

Barron did not complete his words. The door of the house jerked open even as Tarpley reached it. There was a man in the door. A shot sounded, harsh and sharp in the evening quiet, and Tarpley staggered and threw his hands wide, falling toward the door. It was like a drama in miniature to the watchers three hundred yards distant.

Claiborn had leaped from the sidecar and

was running toward the house, his driver at his heels. There was a gun in Claiborn's hand. From the house came a sharp, periodic rapping. Sand spurted at Claiborn's left, leaping up in gouts, spurted up behind him and then Claiborn staggered and went down. The policeman behind him took an uncertain step, then fell beside the captain.

"Tommy gun!" snapped Fellows, half turning toward Barron. "If they——"

But Barron, cheek against the rest of the rifle stock, was cuddling that polished weapon to his shoulder. Even as Fellows looked there came the sharp, authoritative explosion. A sheet of flame flashed at the muzzle of the .30-06, sand was blown forward by the muzzle blast, and Barron's shoulder went back sharply. Fellows jerked his eyes toward the house. A black object hurtled from the door and following it a man lurched out to pitch down, blocking the door. Barron's bolt sounded sharp, and muffled by the enclosing walls there came to the ears of the men on the hillock, the heavy booming explosion of black powder.

"Able!" yelled Barron.

Fellows leaped to his feet and moving in great bounds, sprinted down the hill toward the sheds. As he ran he heard Barron's rifle, once, twice, three times!

ADAM ABLE, when he left the men on the knoll, simply put good judgment and practice to work. He had played with Apache boys in the Tonto and learned from them. Now he slid forward, worming a tortuous course towards his objective, a window in the side of the shack. He counted on reaching it before Barron shot. The sound of the shot would distract the attention of the occupants of the house and Adam planned to go in then. He was going in shooting. There were six shots in the Colt. If that was not enough Adam was out of luck and knew it. He thought it would be enough.

The contours of the sand favored his movements and he made time. Fortunately, about a hundred yards from the knoll, he came to a fold of sand which he had missed in his survey. From the top of the knoll the stretch looked level, but once over the little rise Adam found what amounted to a thoroughfare for him. The depression was almost deep enough for him to rise to hands and knees. Pleased with his luck, Adam went forward rapidly. When he reached the end of the depression he had but fifty yards to go. Waiting there for a moment, aware that he was ahead of schedule, he heard the arrival of the car that carried Len Tarpley's father, and swearing under his breath at the fresh developments, he also heard the motorcycle.

Adam lifted his head cautiously but could not see for the house masked his view. Uncertain as to the proper procedure, he had made up his mind to try a dash when the first shot came from the house. Adam leaped to his feet and made for the window at a run.

As he ran he heard the chatter of the machine gun and then the sharper note of the rifle on the hillock. He reached the side of the house, slashed once at the window with the Colt, shattering glass and frame, and then dived head-first through the opening he had made. He struck on one shoulder as he had planned, rolled, and came half erect in time to throw a shot squarely into the belly of a big man who wheeled from the door.

A SHOT crashed at Adam's left and he felt a burning pain along his neck and shoulder, wheeled and answered the shot. The man who had been with Dreher in the drugstore dropped a gun and clutched his middle. The slip hammer was under Adam's thumb and he jumped to the right like a cat. He saw a man leap for the door, snapped a shot, missed, and saw the fellow break for the open. That was Barron's baby now! The thought flashed through Adam's mind.

FUMES from his own shooting filled his nostrils and he looked about sharply. The room was empty save for the men he had shot. There was a door opposite him and Adam leaped toward it. He jerked it open and jumped aside. As he did so two shots sounded in the room and glass crashed in the upper pane of the window. Adam ducked and went in. He saw Ellen, half sitting, on a bed directly opposite the door. He saw Dreher and another man closing in from his left, and fired twice across his body. Dreher's heavy face looked queer as the man went down.

Ellen screamed. The man with Dreher lifted a gun. Adam shot once more, felt powder burn his neck and had his ear drum almost burst by a shot; wheeled and thrust his empty gun squarely into Fellows's belly.

Fellows yelled, "My God!' Adam jerked his gun back and Ellen screamed again. Fellows's chunky gun was half raised. He lowered it slowly. Adam automatically flipped open the loading gate of the Colt and, with the hammer half cocked, began to jack out empties. Ellen tried to get off the bed, rolled, and fell to the floor. Her feet and hands were bound. Adam dropped the single action and reached her with a step. Fellows, his eyes never leaving the two, lowered his gun and Rufus Barron's heavy voice filled the room behind the reporter.

"By God," roared Barron. "I got two of 'em, Able! By God, two of 'em!"

Adam, bringing out a knife, cut the lashings at Ellen Lassel's feet and wrists. The girl was hysterical. She sobbed and when her hands were free, threw her arms about Adam's neck. Adam, trying to reassure her, held her to him.

"It's all right, Ellen girl," he said. "It's all right. Old Adam's here."

Still the girl clung and Adam held her. Barron joined Fellows at the door and looked over the reporters' shoulder. Adam was still reassuring the girl. "It's all right," he repeated. "Just old Adam, Honey."

FELLOWS, sensing Able behind him, turned. "We'd better go," he said. "There might be——"

"No more!" Barron shook his head shortly. "There were two that tried to break away."

Fellows looked back into the room. Adam had Ellen's head against his chest.

Fellows jerked his head. "We'll take 'em out," he said to Barron. Barron nodded his understanding. Fellows did not want Ellen to see Dreher and the other.

Grasping the coat collar, Fellows dragged the body of Dreher out of the room and deposited it alongside the man Adam had dropped close by the living room window. Rufus Barron followed, tugging a heavy body by the feet.

"I had to take a chance over Able's shoulder," said Fellows. "I shot just when he did."

"There's two more outside," grunted Barron.

"What about Claiborn?"

"I'd forgotten him."

"We'd better see."

Barron jerked a cloth from a table and threw it over the bodies on the floor. "Don't want the girl to see that," he said gruffly.

"Let's get to Claiborn."

Fellows and Barron went out of the house. They stepped over the bodies at the door, stopped and pulled them aside. There were three men there, Tarpley, and two others that Fellows did not recognize. All three were dead. The .30-06 had wrought unbelievable havoc. Fellows's face was white when he straightened up from his examination.

Barron looked at the reporter, his face grim. "I used soft points," he said. "I wasn't taking chances." Fellows nodded. They went out over the sand.

Claiborn was breathing when they reached him. He had three wounds, one not serious in a leg, and the other two

through the body. He had bled a great deal. The policeman, Claiborn's driver, was still alive, but barely so.

Barron looked at the reporter. "Can you ride that thing?" he asked, glancing toward the motorcycle.

Fellows nodded.

"You better get to a phone," Barron said. "Get help here."

"Sure," agreed Fellows. He ran toward the motorcycle. Barron, fumbling in his pockets, brought out two clean handkerchiefs and began to dress Claiborn's wounds.

It was all over.

ONE million dollars worth of Adam Able stood on the station platform at Lindmoore and grinned at half the Barron millions. Only Old Rufus was there. Waite Barron with his bride had sailed on the *Paris* three days before. Adam looked like fifty cents and Rufus looked his millions. Far down the tracks a train whistled.

"You come out," said Adam. "Come out when the kids come to the ranch. I'll be lookin' for you."

Barron said, "I will."

"Wonder where the kid is," said Adam.

"In the station playing the gum machine," grunted Barron. "He can't make up his mind whether he wants to be a cowboy or a reporter since Fellows took hold of him."

Adam's grin broadened. "He'll be a puncher," he said. "Fellows is a nice feller though. He's comin' out to visit me. So is Claiborn, as soon as he gets out of the hospital."

"Claiborn has had enough," said Barron, his smile belying his words. "You and Fellows made a hero out of Claiborn."

"We had to have a goat," explained Adam. "It wouldn't do to publish that you an' me run around shootin' people."

"I suppose not," agreed Barron. "I was glad enough to give Claiborn the credit."

"It was smart of him to follow Tarpley, at that."

"Tarpley's going to the hangout was just a stroke of luck."

Adam felt for the makings and then gave up the idea. "I reckon yo're right," he said. "I don't think he was mixed up in it."

"No, I suppose not. Still——" Barron ceased suddenly. Len Tarpley had come from the station and was approaching the two.

"Ready, kid?" asked Adam.

Len stood beside him, as close as possible, and looked up. "Yes sir, Mister Able," he said.

"Well," said Adam, "I reckon that's that. I won't have to testify against Davis. If you have any trouble with him, show him a ant."

Barron laughed. "We will," he promised.

Again the train whistled, close now. The order board before the depot swung up. Adam held out his hand.

"Well," he said, "so long!"

Barron took the hand. "You come back," he said.

The engine roared past, and the train slowed and stopped. A porter swung down from a Pullman and set his yellow stool in place. Adam released Barron's hand and stooped for his grip.

"The children will be back in two months," said Barron.

"Come out with them," urged Adam.

Down the train the conductor called, "All aboard!"

Adam, grip in hand, made for the step. Len Tarpley climbed up and Adam followed him. The porter swung the stool in place. The engine braked, short, harsh blasts and the wheels creaked slowly. Adam leaned out and lifted his hand. Barron answered the gesture. The porter swung up on the step.

Barron standing on the platform, watched the last car of the train diminish. There was an empty feeling inside him. He missed something. He turned away slowly. The law had come East and was gone.

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To Break the Clan Law or the "Guv'ment" Law Was the Hard Question That Confronted Mountaineer Slim Arnett.

BLOOD LAW

By HAPSBURG LIEBE

Author of "Jailbird," "Paid in Red," etc.

YOUNG Slim Arnett parted the laurels on the brink of the cliff, and peered along the road that led from the Smoky Laurel Mountain fastnesses into the low country. Nobody was in sight. Slim drew his slouch hat a little lower on his forehead, sat down with his cowhide-booted feet hanging over the cliff edge, and waited.

Old Sheriff Ben Rinsford's horse was tired; it moved at a slow gait. With old Ben rode the Cole Logging Company superintendent, Ellwood Thornton, middle-aged and efficient. The superintendent's being with Rinsford was no surprise to the young mountaineer on the cliff. Thornton had been made a deputy in order that he might the better protect the company's interests.

When the pair of horsemen were almost directly below Slim Arnett, he drawled: "I figgered you'd pass yere some time today, Sheriff. Rein in. I got some talk fer you."

Both Rinsford and Thornton knew Arnett. They halted their horses, and stared toward the cliff brink.

"What is it?" said the senior officer, impatiently.

"Ben, you ain't got anything on me, air you?"

"No, Slim." The sheriff strongly suspected that Arnett was an associate of the desperado who had been his chief source of worry for months, but he had no means of obtaining proof of it. "What you got to tell me, Slim?"

The dark eyes of the man on the cliff were uneasy. He said, "The State o' Tennessee and the loggin' comp'ny together air offerin' a thousand dollars fer the capture o' Red Joe Beecher, I heared. Air that right, Ben?"

"Dead right," quickly said Rinsford.

Thornton echoed this with enthusiasm. Joe Beecher had been a scourge to the company. He had held up payroll messenger after payroll messenger, killing one man outright. Twice he had wrecked logging trains out of sheer deviltry.

"I air been a-thinkin' about deliverin' Red Joe to yore jail fer that thousand dollars, i-god," Slim Arnett pursued. "How long would I haf to wait to git the cash money, Ben?"

Rinsford and Thornton exchanged glances. Spitework, thought the superintendent; evidently Beecher and Arnett had split. It was Thornton who answered, "If you'll bring Red Joe to town when the bank's open, Slim, you'll have to wait less than ten minutes for the money. Eh, Sheriff?"

Rinsford nodded. "We'll arrange it. I give you my word for that, Slim. Purty

big job you're tacklin'. You're mighty young. Not more'n twenty, are you?"

"Jest twenty. Well—so long, you 'uns!"

He turned, crept back into the laurels and was gone.

It was then late in the afternoon, and tree shadows were reaching far. Slim Arnett crossed three rock-bound ridges, then turned left in a deep cove that was almost choked with hemlock and poplar, virgin timber. At the head of this cove there stood a crude log hut. Inside, a big, red-haired, red-bearded man of forty sat on a built-in bunk with his shirt off. He was rubbing turpentine over the lower fourth of his back, and swearing.

"Damned old rheumatiz'." Then he saw the newcomer. "Hi, Slim. What fer luck, anyhow?"

Arnett sat down on a box and stared silently at the puncheon floor. His was not a happy countenance. As far back as he could remember, he had hated Joe Beecher. And yet, he'd been a slave for him, because of the oldest law in the mountains—it was blood law, another name for clan law—which is to say, he and Beecher were kinsmen. Arnett had been put to his wits' ends more than once in order to keep himself in the clear during his long and faithful service to his desperado cousin. Often he'd dreamed of running away to some other section, where he'd be free to live as he wished to live. But these had been only dreams. Breaking the old, wild law of the blood—well, it simply wasn't done.

"What fer luck?" repeated Red Joe, irritably, tossing the now empty turpentine bottle into the cold, mildewed fireplace. "See Ben Rinsford?"

Arnett looked up.

"Yeuh, I seed him. Him and Ell Thornton war a-ridin' together to'ards Johnsville. That thar thousand dollars reward business, hit air true enough, they said. The money air a-waitin' in the bank down thar. They'll pay me inside o' ten minutes atter I've brang you to jail, they said. Hit's plum' quare, Joe, you a-havin' me to turn you up thataway. I cain't figger hit out!"

Beecher laughed. Long and loudly he laughed. But it was not at all pleasant to the other's ears.

"You air a crazy fool, Slim! Think I air aimin' to stay in jail and be hung? No, sirree, i-god. Ain't no jail can hold me, Slim. I broke the Oak Hill jail, and the Mapleville jail, didn't I? Shore did, and I'll break the Johnsville jail. You'll be a-waitin' fer me right yere with that thousand; y'git me?"

Arnett blinked. "Air—air that hit, Joe?" he blurted.

"That air hit," said Beecher. "Y'see, i-god, I got to do somepin'. All payrolls is gyarded now. Nothin' to rob. Wisht I'd 'a saved some o' that big money I gambled away and drunk up, but—I didn't—and this yere air the only way I know o' gittin' a-holt o' some more big money. Be a hell of a joke on Ben Rinsford, won't hit? Haw, haw, haw!"

Again Arnett blinked. "But *how* air you a-goin' to git out o' jail, Joe?"

"Last time I war over at the lumber camp," said Beecher, "I snook me a hacksaw blade out o' the shop. I'll have that broke in two pieces and hid on me. Hit's the same way I got out o' them other two jails. Ben Rinsford won't find the blade, don't you fret about that. Saw two window bars in no time, the fust night. Well, mebbe you better be a-hatchin' up some supper fer us, Slim. I air awful hongry. Ain't e't much today, 'count o' this yere damned old rheumatiz' a-hurtin' me so bad."

Slim rose and went out to look for dry wood. He was worried now, for fair. If he became a party to swindling the state and the logging company out of the thousand dollars, he'd be making himself a candidate for the penitentiary. And yet, he'd be breaking the old, wild law of the blood if he refused!

The next morning Joe Beecher woke swearing at his rheumatism again. It was not a bad case, only enough to be annoying. He rose from his built-in bunk, slipped on

his boots and was dressed, then began to turn the few crude furnishings of the hut topsy-turvy.

"Whut air you a-lookin' fer, Joe?" drawled Arnett, who had set about frying bacon and boiling coffee for breakfast.

"I air out o' tarpentine, i-god," Beecher growled, "but I had me a plaster yere which I meant to put on my damned sore back —why, yere she air. Make that cawfee good and strong. Quick as we eats, we'll head out fer jail."

Half an hour afterward, Slim Arnett, acting upon his kinsman's orders, marched that kinsman at a rifle's point down to the nearest of the Cole Company's narrow-gauge logging railroad sidings. Still obeying orders, Slim drew two short lengths of cotton plowline rope from inside his shirt, and with them bound Red Joe securely to the front cross-beam of an empty logging flat. Then he climbed to the rear cross-beam, and released the brakes.

It was down grade all the way to Johnsville. The little car rumbled and swayed, but it kept to the rails for the whole of the nine miles. Near the shipping-point on the main-line railroad in the heart of town, Arnett applied the brakes and brought the flat to a grinding, jangling halt.

Curious people gathered at once. Slim remembered his instructions and called to a townsman, "Go and fetch Sheriff Ben Rinsford, quick! Tell him I air got Red Joe Beecher fer him!"

The fellow hurried away, and returned shortly afterward with the grizzled sheriff. Beecher fumed and cursed, played his part well. The officer untied the outlaw's wrists and ironed them, then removed the rest of the plowline bonds.

"How did you ever do it, Slim?" he inquired of the sober-faced young Arnett. "Catch him asleep?"

"Anyhow, I brang him, didn't I?" muttered Slim.

The jail stood a few rods behind the old wooden court-house building. Rinsford halted his prisoner near the front door and turned to Arnett.

"Ell Thornton is at the bank now, I think. Go over there and tell him to call me up on the telephone. He'll see that you get your money."

Fifteen minutes afterward, Slim Arnett was leaving the bank with a thousand dollars—more money than he had ever seen at one time in all his life before—inside his faded shirt. Wild thoughts assailed him. If the money were only his own! Mules and a sub-logging job with the company; a cabin home, with Mert Tibbetts to take care of it; and, later, children.

. . .

At the old hut hidden away in the cove he waited three days for the return of Red Joe Beecher. Red Joe's plan of escape, surely, had miscarried. Then Slim stole down to the lumber-camp store for something to eat.

"Where've you been, anyway?" cried the sallow lowlander clerk. "Hear what happened to Beecher?"

Arnett could only stare. The clerk ran on, "Well, of course you knew Beecher was in jail, for you took him there—man, you've got nerve, you have! Ben Rinsford—sly old fox—he remembered that Red Joe had sawed his way out of two jails, and he had Joe searched from his toenails up to the very last hair on his head. When they found the hacksaw blade, Beecher made a grab for a deputy's gun —with his manacled hands—and he got it. But old Ben was too quick for him. They buried Joe in Johnsville yesterday!"

"Where'd they find the saw blade?" Arnett swallowed. "In his boots?"

"You'd never guess," the clerk said. "They found it, in two pieces, stuck under a kidney plaster on his back!"

Slim Arnett forgot that he'd come to the camp store for the purpose of buying something to eat. He walked out and set his face toward the cabin of the Tibbettses. His head was high, and his eyes were clear and bright. He had not broken the old mountain blood law.

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The Portage

I

LOOK at Jack Marsden rakin' in them chips over to the wheel," said Moosehide Charlie, as he stood at the Tivoli bar with a little group of sourdoughs. "There's one hombre that's jest nachelly lucky."

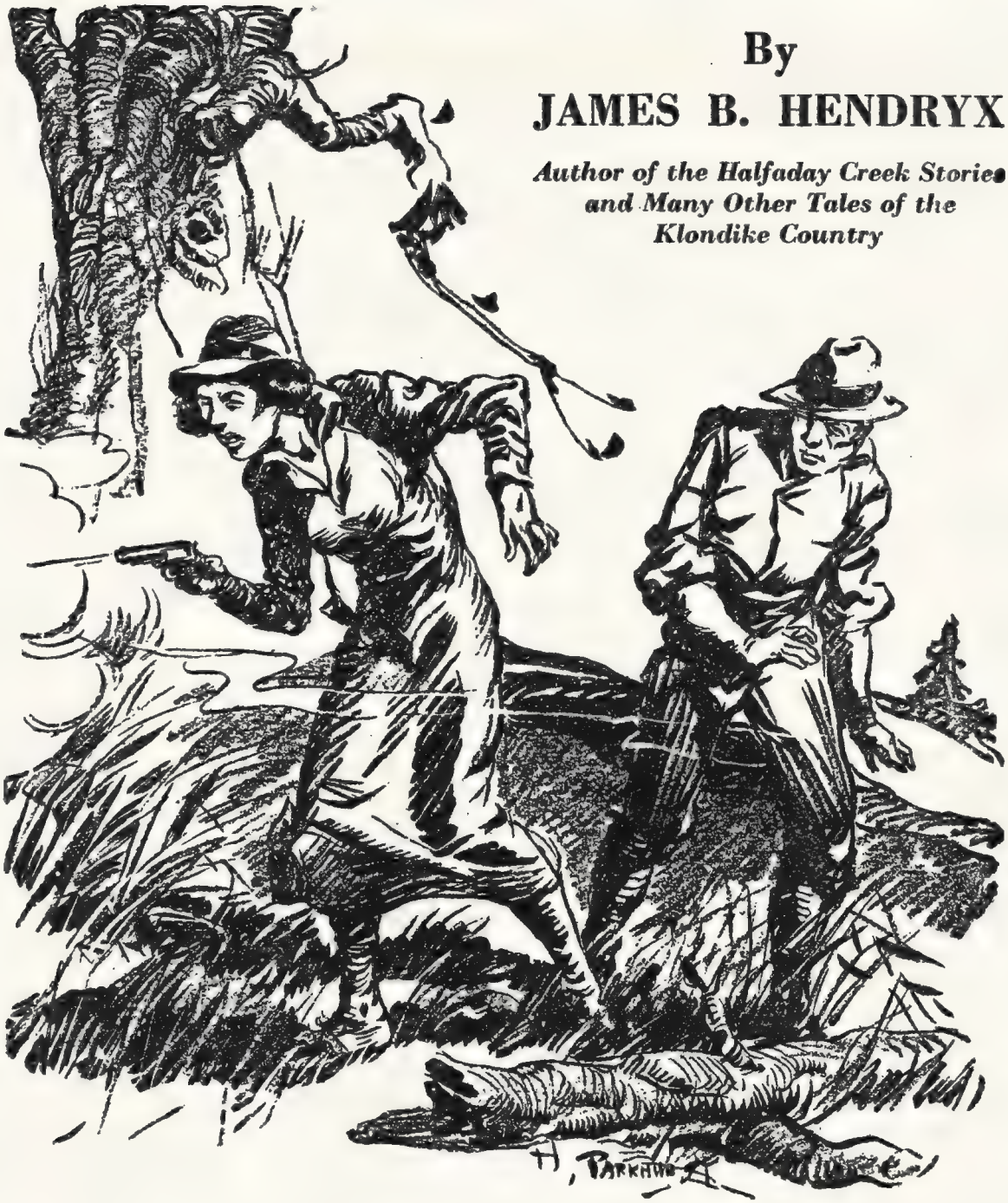
"Mebbe," admitted Camillo Bill dubiously. "He ain't only be'n in the country a year, an' he acts more like a sourdough than any damn chechako I ever seen. But——"

"Hell!" interrupted Old Bettles. "Sourdoughs is borned, an' not made. Yer either one er you ain't, to start out with. Look at the damn chechakos that's swarmed into the country in the last year! There ain't one out of a thousan' of 'em would make a sourdough if they was let live forever."

"That's right," agreed Swiftwater Bill. "They say Marsden's been to a college."

"A college can't give 'em nothin' that

Jack Marsden Always Claimed His Luck Lay up the Forty Mile. But the Sourdoughs Always Claimed Different Kinds of Luck Grow in the North



By

JAMES B. HENDRYX

Author of the Halfaday Creek Stories and Many Other Tales of the Klondike Country

ain't there to start out with," argued Old Bettles, refilling his glass. "If they ain't got no brains, a college can't give 'em none. An' if they have, they'll git along if they never see a college. Take us fellas now—we've all done fairly well fer ourselves, an' there ain't none of us ever seen even the outside of one. Ain't that so, Downey?"

Corporal Downey, of the Northwest Mounted Police, smiled. "I guess yer right. A college could teach a man how to use his brains if he's got 'em, though."

"Hell! So will freezin', an' starvin', an' gougin' gravel, an' playin' poker," retorted Bettles, who loved argument.

"Gawd, lookit!" exclaimed Moosehide. "He's made another winnin'! If I thought a college could give a man luck like that, I'd go to one myself!"

"It's like I was goin' on to say," said Camillo Bill. "Young Marsden's a damn good sport, an' we all like him, an' I always figgered he was plenty smart. It

looked like he was lucky, too, when he staked that claim on Squaw Crick. It was better'n the run of them Squaw Crick claims, an' he was jest gittin' down into the good stuff when, a couple of months ago, he up an' sold out to Joe McCardy on the next claim above him, an' went down an' located him a claim on the upper edge of that flat where the gravel breaks off into black muck. That don't look so damn lucky—an' God knows, it ain't smart."

"Yeah," admitted Moosehide, "that was a kind of a damn fool play. I seen him up on the hillside cuttin' long spruce posts. He claimed he was goin' to make a coffee dam—whatever that is."

"Coffer dam," explained Burr MacShane. "It's to keep the muck from slidin' in on him."

"Why in hell would he want to be diggin' in muck. Anyone knows there ain't no gold in a damn slough!"

"Gold's where you find it," reminded Bettles. "Anyhow, he's smart enough to cash in while his luck holds. He'll be comin' over here d'rectly. Don't rub it in too hard about them claims—he's a good kid."

A MOMENT later they edged over to make room for the bronzed young man whose eyes twinkled at them from beneath the brim of a Stetson. "Drink up," he smiled, as he tossed a well filled pouch onto the bar. "I just took the wheel for eleven hundred. This is my lucky day."

"Here's mud in yer eye," toasted Old Bettles, holding his glass aloft, and downing its contents at a swallow.

Camillo Bill snickered. "I'll bet he's had a damn sight more mud in his eye than gravel, sence he located down there on the flat."

Marsden's smile widened to expose white, even teeth. "You bet I have! And in my hair, and on my clothes—and under 'em, too! But—I'm through with that muck claim. I've got something else that looks pretty good to me on a creek that runs into a lake, way up the Forty Mile."

"Hell—we quit the Forty Mile two year ago!" said Bettles. "You better stick upriver, Kid."

"Yeah—an' you better stick to the gravel, an' leave the sloughs fer the ducks," grinned Moosehide Charlie. "So yer coffee dam didn't work, eh?"

"Oh, sure—it worked all right. That's a good claim there on the edge of the flats."

"Why you quittin' it, then?" asked MacShane.

"It don't belong to me any more," grinned Marsden. "I sold it."

"Sold it!" cried Bettles. "Who in hell would buy a claim down there in the muck?"

"I sold it to Cray."

"Cray!" exclaimed Camillo Bill. "You mean the Syndicate man?"

"Yes, he's a mining engineer representing a British syndicate. They're picking up a lot of good stuff along the river."

"Well, I'll be damned!" exclaimed Old Bettles. "Did you git enough to make wages an' pay fer gittin' the mud washed off'n your clothes?"

MARSDEN laughed. "Yes—pretty good wages. I didn't bother with the washing. I threw the clothes away. He paid me sixty thousand. It figures about a thousand a day for my labor. Certified check—good as the Bank of England. Like to see it?"

Wide-eyed, the sourdoughs crowded closer as Marsden drew the oblong slip of water-marked paper from his wallet and laid it on the bar for their inspection.

"Good God!" breathed Old Bettles, picking the slip up reverently. "It's pounds—not dollars!"

"Sure, pounds," grinned Marsden. "I thought he meant dollars, too—when he offered me sixty thousand. But when he handed me the check I didn't kick any. I had a hell of a time holding a poker face, though. I told you this was my lucky day. Drink up!"

"But how did you know there was gold in that muck?" asked Moosehide, as Marsden pocketed the check.

"Not in it—under it," explained Marsden. "I figured that the flat was an old lake bed that had been filled in with silt. I noticed a little spur of rock that jutted out from the hill, and ran under the muck right where the original mouth of the creek must have been. If I was right, I figured that a lot of gold must have collected behind that reef, and then been covered up with muck. So I cut a long slim pole, and located the reef under about six feet of muck. I found that, just as I figured, behind the reef was gravel. So I staked the claim and went down into that gravel—and believe me I found plenty of gold. The syndicate will clean up big on their investment, even at pounds instead of dollars. It isn't poor man's mining. It'll cost 'em quite a bit to get it. Anyhow, I cashed in on my hunch."

"I'll say you did!" agreed Camillo Bill. "An' if I didn't know better, I'd be almost tempted to foller you down to Forty Mile!"

"Nope," averred Old Bettles with conviction, "the Forty Mile's dead. The kid, here, used his head, an' he figgered out

somethin' that us old timers all overlooked. But that ain't sayin' he'll make a winnin' every time he plays. We've all worked the Forty Mile, an' we know she's worked out; that is, onless a man's satisfied to fool around snipin' the bars. Take my advice, kid, an' leave the Forty Mile alone. This upriver country's where the dust is —an' it ain't hardly been scratched yet."

"My hunch says that my luck lies on the Forty Mile," smiled Marsden.

"The Forty Mile it is, then," said Burr MacShane. "A man is bound to play his hunch. I'd foller mine if it said there was gold at the North Pole!"

II

A WEEK later, far up the South Fork of the Forty Mile, young Marsden stepped from his canoe at the mouth of a creek that cascaded noisily down from the heights and merged with the river in a riot of foam and bubbles. For a long moment he stared down, frowning at the trampled sedge and the two packs that lay at the foot of the ridge, then raised his eyes to scan the steep ascent. Whoever had landed here had at least reached the first terrace with his canoe. But who would be landing here? As Old Bettles had said, the Forty Mile was dead—worked out—abandoned when Carmack made his strike upriver.

A year before, on the word of an old Indian he had befriended, Marsden had landed on this spot and laboriously carried his canoe and his light stampeding pack up over the high ridge that rose from the river in a series of three rocky terraces or benches, and then sloped off to the spruce-studded shore of a narrow crooked lake. He had paddled the length of the lake and, on a small creek that emptied into its farther end, he had found gold. Here he had staked his Discovery claim. Sticking as they did to the river and the flatter gravelly creeks, the prospectors had no knowledge of this lake that lay behind the high rim. The Indian had told him that no white man had ever seen the lake, and certain it was that nowhere on its entire length of three or four miles, had he found any evidence of a campsite.

He had worked at his claim, and on the several trips he had made to the trading store at Forty Mile for supplies, he had managed to improve his portage trail

—cutting a path through a thicket, felling a couple of logs to bridge a springy place on the second terrace, and managing a few crude steps on the cat-climb to the summit. Then, on one of his trips to Forty Mile, had come news of the Squaw Creek stampede, and he had thrown in with it. Now he was returning to his claim on his creek in the hills—to find that someone had landed at his landing and was undoubtedly traversing his portage to his lake.

MARSDEN eyed the two packs with disfavor. They didn't look like Siwash packs, nor like chechako packs, either. But what sourdough would be fooling around the Forty Mile, when everyone knew that the gold was upriver?

He examined the spongy ground. The sedge was freshly bent over and bruised, and though he could get no clear-cut imprint of tracks, he concluded that two people had landed.

Unloading his supplies, he made up a pack, covered what remained with a tarp, drew his canoe from the water, and cached it.

"They'll be coming back for the rest of their stuff, and I'll meet 'em," he muttered. "Or maybe I'll overtake 'em on the lake. I'm glad I left that little canoe at the other end of the portage. I suppose I'll have neighbors, now—damn 'em!" he added fiercely. Then he grinned. "I might have known that my dream of having my creek all to myself was too good to be true. A man oughtn't to expect to hog the whole country."

Shouldering his pack, he stepped to the ridge, and began the steep ascent, setting his forehead firmly against his tump strap. A hundred-pound pack on a forty-five degree grade is a load for any man, especially when he has to watch each step for his footing. By the time Marsden had reached the first terrace, he was dripping sweat from every pore. Resting for five minutes to recover his wind, he crossed the narrow terrace and tackled the second ascent, which was longer, but not so steep. This second terrace alternated a flat rock floor with spaces of marshy ground upon which grew a profusion of wild onion, purple fire-weed, and a stunted growth of spruce, willow and birch which stretched for a quarter of a mile to the third rise, shorter and steeper than either of the others.

Slogging through the scrub under his pack, he crossed the worst of the springy places on his fallen timbers, and halted suddenly at sight of a pack-laden figure that was just about to tackle the steep ascent to the summit.

"Hello!" he called and quickened his pace. The next instant he was brought up short to stare into the face of the girl who had turned quickly at the sound of his voice. Not once did Marsden's eyes falter from the deep violet eyes that gazed into his own, while his feet, as though drawn by a magnet, measured the distance that separated them. Within arm's reach of her he halted, and their eyes held, while subconsciously Marsden saw that her lips were parted giving a glimpse of teeth that gleamed like wet pearls in the sunlight.

And still neither spoke. Vaguely the man realized that something was happening to him—something that had never happened to him before; his brain seemed to be in a state of delicious confusion. He was aware that illusive glints lurked in the violet eyes that seemed to widen and darken, as they gazed steadily into his own. He could see a vein throbbing slowly in the white throat that rose from the open collar of the dark blue flannel shirt, and he was aware that the breath seemed to quicken to the rise and fall of the bosom that she clutched with one brown hand. He knew, too, that his own breath was coming faster even than was warranted by the exertion of the trail. He must do something, say something; a man couldn't stand there forever, gazing into a pair of violet eyes—even violet eyes that held lurking glints, deep down.

HE DREW in his breath with a slight catch. "So," he heard his voice saying, "it's *you*. Here on the portage."

The curving red lips trembled with just the suggestion of a smile, and three tiny puckers appeared between the arched brows. "Yes," she answered, as one speaking in a dream. "It's—me. But who are you? And—and—were you—expecting to find me—here on the portage?"

Marsden's heart thrilled to the deep, throaty tones of her voice as the blood went surging through his veins. His own words, uttered seemingly without direction of his brain had sounded flat, and inane to his ears—but—she hadn't found them so—she was answering them—was having trouble with her own words. Could it be that something was happening to her—too? The violet eyes had never left his own. Words came tumbling from his lips: "Yes—I was expecting to find you—sometime—someplace—it just had to be—but—it's so fitting—so absolutely as it should be—to find you here—on my portage."

The brown hand clutched more tightly at the shirt, as the girl's words interrupted him: "But—who—do you think I am?"

"Why, you are *the girl!* I've known you always. And I knew that sometime I would find you! It had to be. Life is like that. Always, there is *the girl.* The trouble is, most fellows won't wait till they find her. They go on and on, and then they marry some other girl—because they haven't got the patience—or the faith—or—or the guts to keep on until they do find her."

"And when they do," broke in the girl bitterly, the brown hand lifting suddenly and clutching at her throat, "it's too late!" There was a catch in her voice that was almost a sob, and the violet eyes held hint of tragedy.

MARSDEN smiled—a happy, boyish smile, and stepping close, he lifted the pack from her shoulders, and set it against a rock. She did not resist, and as their hands met for a fleeting instant, each flushed deeply. "It's never too late," he replied, as he swung his own pack beside the other. "Even if a man waited till he was thirty—or even thirty-five, it wouldn't be too late. They could enjoy their old age together."

"Darby and Joan," muttered the girl, her eyes on the far skyline.

"That's it, exactly! But—we're lucky! We didn't have to wait till we were old to find each other! I had a hunch that my luck lay here on the Forty Mile! And—back in Dawson they're saying that the Forty Mile is dead!"

"Yes," answered the girl in a dull toneless voice. "The Forty Mile is dead. And I wish I were!"

"It isn't dead for us," interrupted Marsden enthusiastically. "Come on! I'll show you. It's a good two miles to the lake, and we've got more trips to make. Then, there's a three or four mile paddle before we get—*home.*"

"You're Marsden," said the girl, the violet eyes once more upon his face.

"But—how did you know?" Surprise showed in the man's eyes, even as his lips broke into a smile. "You see, I knew you the minute I saw you—I've always known you—but you've never had a name. There was never any name that seemed to fit."

"Your name is on your location stake," answered the girl. "We staked in above you."

"Fine!" cried Marsden. "But it won't be long till you'll be down on Discovery! I suppose your dad's gone on ahead with the canoe. Come on, we'll overtake him. There's something I want to tell him—something mighty important. It's the most important thing I've ever told anybody. And mind, I'm saying 'tell him'—not 'ask him.'" Stooping, Marsden swung the girl's pack to his own shoulders, and adjusted the tump strap. "Because," he continued, "there's nothing in the world that can keep us from——"

"Oh—don't," cried the girl hysterically.

"Don't what?" asked Marsden in surprise.

"The pack," answered the girl, struggling to keep her voice steady. "Don't carry it. It's not heavy. I—I'm used to it."

"Listen—you. This pack's seventy pounds, if it's an ounce. It is heavy, a darn sight too heavy for you to carry over a trail like this—or any other trail from now on," he added. "And you haven't told me your name. I wanted to use it, then. I can't go on just calling you 'you.' You know mine, but that's only for mail, and recorder's books. My friends call me 'Jack.'"

"It's Rilla. But——"

"Rilla," repeated the man. "I like that. I hated to ask you because I was sure it was going to be Lizzie or Maggie."

AGAIN the little puzzle wrinkles appeared between the arched brows, and the corners of the lips twitched in the suggestion of a smile. "Why?" she asked.

"Because I've always been taught that there is no really perfect thing. Everything must have some defect to mar it—some little thing that makes it fall just short of perfection. And if that is true of things, it must be true of people—but in your case it isn't true. The only possible defect would have been the name—and that isn't a defect at all! So now I know the books are all wrong. Perfection is attainable—down to the minutest detail."

"Don't! You—you mustn't talk like that! You—you don't know——"

"Sure I know," laughed the man. "You'd be surprised how much I know. But come on, let's be going."

As he turned to the steep ascent her hand fell on his arm, and the touch of the strong brown fingers thrilled him as no woman's touch had ever thrilled him. "Take it off—the pack. I'll carry it. *Please!*"

There was such evident sincerity, such a depth of pleading in the words, that Marsden's glance sought her face as his hand closed over the strong brown fingers on his arm. For a long moment the girl's hand lay imprisoned in his own, then it was gently withdrawn, and the violet eyes rose to his in such a look of blended tragedy and hopeless terror as he had never seen in any eyes, as the words fluttered imploringly from the drooping lips: "Oh, slip the straps off—please! He—he'd be terribly angry! He carries a pistol. He might kill you. And he'd beat me! He's a—a brute!"

"Who?" asked Marsden, astounded at the note of terror in the voice. "Your father?"

"My husband."

"Husband!" he repeated, his brain groping to grasp the import of the word.

"Yes," she was saying, her voice steady now—but toneless. "I'm one of those who didn't wait—who didn't have the patience—or the faith—or the—the guts to wait for the right man."

HER words seemed to come from a great distance. Mechanically Marsden slipped the straps from his shoulders, lowered the pack to the ground and watched, unseeing, as the girl swung it to her shoulders.

"Good-by," she said, and turned abruptly to the climb.

"Wait! Rilla! Good God—there's some terrible mistake!"

"Yes, a terrible mistake. I know it—now. But it's too late to do anything about it. Life's like that—I guess. I *hate* life!"

"But tell me, who is he—your husband? When did you marry him? And why?"

"His name is Louis Labrie. We were married six months ago—in Circle. He was good to me, then. Dad had just died—and I was alone."

"You poor kid!" Marsden stepped forward impulsively, but from the first crude step of the climb, she raised her hand to repulse him.

"No," her voice was steady now—and bitterly hard. "I married him. I'll see it through. I'm game."

"By God! If he lays a hand on you I'll——"

"Go back," she begged. "Don't let him find you here. He packed the canoe to the lake, and he'll be returning soon. He'll be angry because I haven't made better time on the trail. If he finds you here he'd—he'd say horrible things, and he'd half kill me. Please go back. You can come in tomorrow—or the next day—to

your claim. He mustn't know I ever met you. It won't much matter to you—the loss of one day, or two. Please go, and come back later."

"Come back later!" cried the man fiercely. "Good God—Rilla—come back—and live there—on the next claim to you! I can't come back! I wouldn't dare to. Feeling as we do, something would happen—some damned thing! I—we couldn't help it. It would be fate!"

The girl's face was flushed. "Maybe it would be better to stay away; but—your claim?"

"Damn the claim! I'll find other claims. But I'll never find another woman! I'm going now. If anything should happen—if you should ever need me—Jack Marsden, Dawson, will reach me. And no matter where I am, I'll come. And I'll come to get you."

The girl nodded slowly. "Yes," she said, and again the voice sounded low-pitched and throaty, "I'll remember. Good-by."

III

THAT night, miles down the Forty Mile, Marsden sat beside his little fire and thought wild thoughts. He'd kill Louis Labrie and take his woman! She was his woman—Jack Marsden's. Both of them knew that; both had realized it from the moment they stood there on the portage looking deep into each other's eyes. Labrie was a brute. He didn't deserve a woman—any woman—certainly not this woman. Damn Labrie—he beat her, and forced her to carry seventy-pound packs over mountains! He carried a pistol. Well, he, Marsden would carry a pistol from now on. He'd learn how to use it, too—and some day he'd go back. Go back and kill Louis Labrie!

The next day he drew his canoe onto the bank at Forty Mile, and made his way to the saloon. As Old Bettles had said, Forty Mile was dead. Marsden viewed with jaundiced eye the deserted police barracks, the empty cabins and store buildings that spoke of the camp's better days before Carmack made his big strike upriver.

Even the loafers and the half dozen casual drinkers in the saloon reflected the moribund atmosphere of the place. Marsden smiled, grimly. Forty Mile was dead, but he'd liven it up a bit. He was not a drinking man—but he resolved suddenly to get drunk. Other men got drunk, why shouldn't he? Anyway, it would serve to take his mind off Rilla Labrie.

Tossing a heavy little sack onto the bar, he ordered the drinks for all and sundry. And all and sundry drank—and drank again, and yet again, as Marsden continued to buy.

Tongues loosened under the warmth of the genial liquor as the men crowded the bar. "Where you from, stranger?"

"Made a strike, somewheres?"

"I came down the river."

"How's things at Dawson?"

"Thought I seen you headin' up the Forty Mile a few days back. Alone in a canoe. Wasn't that you?"

"Yes—I just came down the Forty Mile."

"Musta met Labrie an' his new woman goin' up then," said someone. "He's got a hunch there's somethin' left, way up. But hell—the Forty Mile's played out. There's no luck no more on the Forty Mile."

"It's a damn shame—Labrie marryin' that gal. She's the third woman he's had, not countin' that klooch he murdered up on the Porcupine."

"Murdered?" exclaimed Marsden.

"Shore he murdered her," vouched someone. "Took her off up the Porcupine on a prospectin' trip, an' she ain't never been seen sence. You kin figger it out fer yerself."

"Yeah," chimed in another, "an' there don't no one know what become of the first one he had, neither. Down to Rampart, it was, an' the Tanana Belle come through that winter givin' dancin' shows. Labrie follered her on to Eagle, an' married her there. He claimed his woman had died—an' I guess she had, all right. Labrie seen to that."

"The Tanana Belle's lively enough yet," laughed a man. "I seen her couple of weeks ago up to Dawson kickin' up her heels in the Klondike Palace, with the best of 'em."

"Yeah," seconded another, "an' I'll bet she's forty, if she's a day. She kin fill up the wrinkles in her face with paint, but damn if I kin see how she keeps her legs that supple!"

"How in hell could Labrie marry this new one, with the Tanana Belle still livin'?" queried one.

"What does she give a damn? She's havin' her fun. An' what with the damn chechakos crowdin' the Palace every night, she makes more'n Labrie does with his prospectin'."

"Labrie's a good man on the cricks, though. I wouldn't be surprised an' sometime he'd make a real strike."

"He might be a good man on the cricks," grunted the bartender, "but he's a damn ornery one off'n 'em. Someone ort to shoot him fer the good of the nation. Old Jim Wilson would turn over in his grave, if he know'd his gal had throw'd in with Labrie."

"Wonder what she ever done it fer?"

The bartender shrugged. "What would a gal like her do in a camp like Circle? Old Jim died, an' there she was. Circle's deader'n Forty Mile. She couldn't go on jest snipin' the bars, like Old Jim done. Labrie had a good claim up on Birch Crick. He's smart, an' he's been around a lot. She didn't know nothin' about his reputation. Labrie's got good looks an' good manners. He could fool any woman—an' Old Jim's gal ain't over eighteen, nineteen. She didn't know nothin' about men. She'd think they was all as square as Old Jim was."

"I'll bet she knows, by now," said a man grimly, as the talk switched to other things.

WITH four or five good jolts of strong liquor under his belt, Marsden had been getting on well with his spree. With each drink the outlook had seemed a little less hopeless. Forty Mile wasn't such a bad camp. Lot of good fellows in Forty Mile. A soft rosy haze pervaded the room, through which the voices of the miners came soothingly. Then someone had mentioned Louis Labrie, and Marsden found himself listening. As the talk progressed, the rosy fog that was creeping over his brain had been dispelled, and he had listened grimly—missing no word. As glasses had been emptied, he saw that they were refilled, albeit he managed to slop his own drinks onto the floor.

When the conversation swung from Labrie, he turned to the bartender. "Fill 'em up once more," he said, "and I'll be going. I'm pulling out for Dawson."

As the man returned the sack after weighing out the dust, he eyed Marsden narrowly. "Sure yer all right, kid, to hit the big river? You've been throwin' 'em in pretty fast, an'—well, a man needs his

head when he tackles the Yukon in a canoe."

The vast import of what he had heard had cleared Marsden's brain of all effect of the liquor. He smiled at the bartender, and the man marveled at the steady saneness of his eyes. He didn't know that the other had ditched all but the first few drinks.

"I'm all right. Fit as a fiddle. Just stopped in for a little refreshment. So long."

"I believe you are, at that," admitted the white aproned one. "I couldn't hold no dozen er more good stiff drinks without feelin' it—an' showin' it, too. So long, kid. Yer a damn good drinkin' man."

IV

LIGHTS blazed in the Klondike Palace, and through its open doors floated the incessant jangle of the tinny piano, and the scraping of many feet. Sourdoughs shunned the place with its long bar, its crooked gambling devices, its importuning painted women, and its enclosed drinking booths. But the chechakos, craving one last wild fling before striking out into the hills to make their everlasting fortunes, patronized it liberally.

It was long past midnight when Marsden entered the door, stepped to the bar, and ordered a drink. His fingers toyed with his glass as his eyes traveled slowly from the set faces behind the stacked chips of a table of stud players, to the tense group at the faro layout, to the eager expectancy with which the players of roulette watched the clicking ball settle into its slot, to the dance hall beyond the wide arched doorway where girls in tawdry finery danced round and round in the arms of the drunken chechakos. The piano banged a jazz crescendo, and the dancers flocked to the bar, or paired off in the little drinking booths.

A chechako gravitated toward the wheel, deserting his partner at the bar. The piano struck up another rag time tune, and, wiping their lips, the dancers returned to the floor.

"Let's dance, kid," invited the deserted girl, thumbing her nose at the back of her erstwhile partner. "That cheap skate has got to go get himself heeled before he can buy a girl a drink."

"Come on," grinned Marsden, and crossing the floor they stepped into the whirl of a giddy waltz.

"You dance good, kid," the girl said, looking up into his face, with eyes half closed, when they had made the second circuit of the floor. "I could love a guy that likes to dance."

Marsden, whose eyes had been studying the faces of the dancers as they looped and circled about the room, answered abstractedly, "Yes, I think so, too. Which one is the Tanana Belle?" He was conscious that the body pressed close against his own stiffened perceptibly, and that the half-closed, languorous eyes narrowed as the head lifted from his shoulder and she swept the dancers with a glance.

"Over there," she said, "in the baby blue tulle skirt, dancin' with the guy with the yella shirt. It's been so damn long since she was a baby that she's got to wear baby blue to remember it by." There was a nasty rasp in her voice as she added, "Take it from me, kid, an' don't fall fer her. She's old enough to be yer ma—an' that ain't all neither. I'm tellin' you."

There was no percentage in long dances on a busy night in the Klondike Palace, and a few moments later Marsden, along with the others, led his partner to the bar and bought a drink. When the piano struck up again, the girl took his arm, but Marsden shook his head.

"Not right now," he smiled. "They're coming a little too fast."

The girl sniffed. "So you're a piker too, eh? An' you looked like a good kid!"

AS SHE turned from the bar, a man claimed her, and a moment later Marsden saw her whirling through the

maze of another dance in the arms of her new partner. He saw, too, that the Tanana Belle was still dancing with the man in the yellow shirt. She must have been beautiful once, he speculated, as his glance traveled from the shapely silken legs that showed below the knee-length skirt, rested for a moment upon the well formed back and gleaming shoulders, and glimpsed for a fleeting instant the finely chiseled face, heavy with rouge and mascara.

Again the music ceased and, a man dropping out of the stud game, yellow shirt took his seat, leaving the Tanana Belle at the bar. Marsden laid a hand on her bare arm.

"The next dance?" he asked.

"Sure, kid!" she smiled. "You're a swell dancer. I seen you on the floor with that cutey a while back. Them chickens is all right for a while—but they don't last. Couple of years an' they're all burnt out. They don't know nothin'."

"They sure don't," agreed Marsden, as he crossed to the dance floor, "or they wouldn't be here."

"Ain't it the truth! But as long as men are what they are—they'll keep a-comin'." The piano blared forth, and the woman drew close as they stepped out. "This is one I like," she said—'Happy Days in Dixie'—and believe me, old Horse Face Joe can rattle them keys. Let's go!"

They danced twice, and as they stood together at the bar at the end of the second dance, Marsden smiled into the eyes that looked into his own from beneath mascaraed lashes. "Let's sit this one out," he suggested. "We can take our drinks into a booth and talk."

"Sure, kid. Give our legs a rest. God knows, mine need one. Anyway, I like to talk to a smart man. You're smart—I can tell by what you said about them girls."

In the curtained booths, with the drinks on the little table between them, the woman leaned forward, elbows on the table, chin resting on the doubled knuckles of both hands. "What's on yer mind, kid?" she asked abruptly. "You don't belong in here. You're okay. I've seen you before, mixin' in with the sourdoughs. An' they don't hang around this gyp joint much—they've got too much sense."

SHE paused, and Marsden was aware that he felt a distinct liking for this woman, who faced him across the table.

"What does anyone come here for?" he parried with a smile.

"Yeah? But not you. Don't be a sap, kid! I wasn't made in a minute. I've got two good eyes in my head. An' I can tell what a man's mind's on by the way he dances—see? Yours ain't on women, or you'd never have ditched that youngster for me. You came here to see me, personal. I seen your eyes followin' me while you stood at the bar."

Marsden's smile widened. "Nothing much gets by you, does there?"

"Not if I know it. A girl's got to keep her eyes open in this man's camp to get

along. Come on, spit it out, kid—what's the answer?"

"Do you know Louis Labrie?" asked Marsden abruptly.

The woman laughed—a low, brittle laugh in which was nothing of mirth. "Know him! Who would know him, if I didn't?"

"What sort of a fellow is he?"

The reddened lips hardened. "Kid," she said, after a moment's hesitation, "did you ever hear the worst that's ever been said about any man?"

"No—I can't say that I have."

"Well, neither have I. But if you ever do, just multiply it by ten, an' call it Louis Labrie."

"You loved him once, didn't you? You married him."

The woman nodded thoughtfully. "Yes —I married him," she answered in a low, hard voice. "Maybe I did love him—once. It was a long while ago. I forget."

"You don't love him now?"

The woman's eyes narrowed. "What the hell right have you got to ask me? I ought to sock you one on the jaw! It's none of your damn business who I love!" She paused, the flash of resentment faded from her eyes, and she continued. "But —you look like a good kid. You've got a reason for askin'."

Marsden nodded. "Yes," he answered gravely. "I've got a reason. There's a girl—a beautiful girl, wonderful, not like ——" he hesitated awkwardly, and the woman laughed harshly.

"Go ahead, kid, an' say it. We ain't thin-skinned. She's not like us dance hall girls, eh? We know what men think of us, but we don't give a damn. They dance with us, an' buy us drinks, but when it comes to marryin', they pass us up. The right kind of men do—your kind—an' God knows, kid, I don't blame 'em. Once in a while a man marries one of us out of a dance hall an' finds out he's got a woman that'll stick to him through hell an' high water. But it's a long shot, kid—like playin' yer whole stack on a single number against a crooked wheel. An' life is a crooked game, kid—damn crooked. Yer born with the deck stacked against you."

"I was thinking, when I spoke," explained Marsden earnestly, "about girls—like that first one I danced with. You know I meant to cast no slur on you. You've got brains, and——"

"Yes, an' I've got legs. An' believe me, kid, on the Yukon legs have got brains beat all to hell, if a girl's got to make a livin'. But go ahead. What's this wonderful girl that you spoke of got to do with Louis Labrie?"

"He married her," said Marsden.

"Married her! When?"

MARSDEN saw the clenched hands beneath the woman's chin tighten as the blood receded from her face, so that her rouged cheeks glowed in two vivid splotches of scarlet.

"About six months ago—in Circle," he answered.

Slowly the blood returned to the woman's face. Mechanically she reached out, picked up her whiskey glass, and downed its contents at a gulp. "Get me another drink, kid," she said, in a low dull voice. "I need it."

Marsden stepped to the bar and returned with a glass of whiskey. As he placed it on the table before her he noticed a tiny red spot on the woman's arm—a spot he was sure had not been there before. She sat for several moments toying with the glass.

"Go on," she said in a steady voice, "tell me about it."

"There isn't much to tell. That is—not much that I can tell. It seems that Labrie had a claim on Birch Creek——"

"Yes, I know. It was a good claim, but not what you could call a strike. Go on."

"Well, a prospector down at Circle died and left this daughter, eighteen or nineteen years old—and Labrie married her. That's all; except that in six months she's learned to fear Labrie—and to hate him."

The woman's eyes were raised to his. "That ain't all," she said, quietly. "Where do you come in?"

Marsden flushed and leaned forward, a serious look in his eyes.

"Don't think I'm a rotter—because I love another man's wife," he said earnestly. "I loved her the minute I saw her. I couldn't help it. I never loved any woman before. And I didn't know she was married, and she's not married. She thinks she is, but Labrie was already married to you."

The woman's eyes widened, a short

harsh laugh broke from her lips, and suddenly picking up the glass she took a short sip of fiery liquor, and rasped her throat several times.

"What's the matter?" growled Marsden, the flush deepening.

She answered with an effort. "What do you care what I think? I'm nothin' but a——"

"You've got sense," broke in Marsden roughly. "I do care. Listen. I've got a location on a little creek that runs into a lake up off the Forty Mile. I left it a year ago to throw in with the Squaw Creek Stampede. The other day I went back, and on the portage between the river and the lake—my portage—I overtook the girl. She was carrying a seventy-pound pack over a trail that's a cat-climb in places. Labrie made her carry it; only I didn't know anything about Labrie then—he'd gone on ahead with the canoe. But I knew the girl! I'd known her for ever and ever—though I'd never seen her before. And she'd known me always. I saw it in her face as we stood there, just looking into each other's eyes."

He paused, and the woman breathed a long sigh. "My God, kid, do they really make 'em like you?"

"What do you mean?" asked Marsden shortly.

"Oh, nothin'. The men I know are different—that's all. A damn sight different. God, if I ever had a kid, an' he was like you, I'd——" Her voice faltered, and she broke off abruptly and once again she sipped at her liquor. "Go on," she said in a low, tense voice. "Where do I fit into the picture? You didn't hunt me up for nothin'."

"Why, you're Labrie's wife. I—I thought you could help me."

"What's he doin' on your crick?"

"She told me that he abandoned his Birch Creek claim, and located in above my Discovery claim."

"Well, why didn't you go on to your claim, an' kill Labrie, an' take the woman?"

"You mean—murder him?"

The woman laughed shortly. "With the set-up there'd be on that crick, you wouldn't have to call it murder. It wouldn't be a week before Labrie would find out—an' then it would be self-defense when you killed him."

Marsden shook his head. "I didn't dare to go in. Not that I fear Labrie. I don't. But I couldn't trust myself there—and besides, a man couldn't deliberately create a situation that would cause him to kill another for defending his woman—even if she wasn't his wife. He'd never feel right about it, would he? And the girl—she couldn't help but know. It wouldn't be playing the game. We'd get a wrong start from the first."

THE woman reached below the table top, drew a small package of tobacco and some papers from her stocking, and rolled a cigarette. Marsden held a match, and she drew the smoke deep into her lungs and exhaled it slowly, her eyes on the man's face.

"You couldn't kill Louis Labrie, anyway," she said, speaking slowly. "He always goes heeled—carries a gun inside his shirt. He'd get you without givin' you a break, kid."

"I'm not afraid of him."

"You're a fool then. He'd get you from the brush when you wasn't expectin' it. One more murder wouldn't bother him any."

"If he's a murderer, why haven't the police——?"

The woman laughed shortly. "No evidence, kid. He's smart, in his way. His killin's was over acrost the line—in Alaska—an' if you know anything about those marshals—well, he ain't got the Mounted to deal with over there. An' the Forty Mile is American territory, too, except jest the lower part."

"Yes, I know. I had to record my claim in Eagle."

"Eagle," breathed the Tanana Belle, blowing a plume of blue smoke into the

air. "We was married in Eagle." Her eyes followed the dispersing blue smoke, high above Marsden's head. "Is this girl pretty," she asked abruptly, "the one he married?"

Marsden's eyes lighted. "She's the most beautiful woman I ever saw." He paused for a moment and smiled. "Present company, of course excepted."

"Don't be a fool, kid," said the woman bitterly, her eyes still on the lazily dispersing smoke. "You didn't have to say that to me. Time was when I wasn't so hard to look at. But it's a long while back. How did you expect me to help you?"

"It's like this," said Marsden, leaning forward eagerly. "I thought we could go to Eagle and swear out a warrant charging him with bigamy. There's a marshal there, and he could bring Labrie in. That would automatically void his subsequent marriage to Rilla; or at least fix things so it could be voided—I'm not up on the law. And Labrie would do a good long stretch in jail."

"Rilla, eh?" repeated the woman, her eyes narrowing slightly. "A pretty girl with a pretty name. Louis done well for himself, didn't he?"

MARSDEN detected a flinty note in the woman's voice. "Will you go with me to Eagle and bring your—your papers, whatever is necessary to prove your marriage to Labrie? I've got everything we need for the trip in the canoe."

"No!" The word rasped between the painted lips, drawn now to a thin red line. "Why should I play your game for you? Listen—Louis Labrie is a good prospector. Sometime he'll make a strike, a real strike—see? An' when he does—I'm his wife. I've got the paper that says so, signed by the priest that hitched us. Just as quick as Louis Labrie sticks his shovel down into the real stuff, he's goin' to remember his little blushin' bride—an' don't you forget it! I've put up with enough—God knows I've earned it! I'll get mine—an' that little fool that married him in Circle will be left holdin' the bag! Why the hell should I help put Louis Labrie behind the bars? He can't make no strike in a jail."

Picking up her glass she drained its contents at a gulp, and returned it to the table. Without a word Marsden picked it up and pushing through the curtains, stepped to the bar. As he returned to the booth with the refilled glass, the girl with whom he had first danced brushed lightly against him, her lips curled in a sneer.

"Treating grandma good, ain't you, dearie? Well, she needs it!"

Without deigning to notice, Marsden reentered the booth just as the Tanana Belle was hurriedly concealing something in the front of her low cut gown. He caught the metallic flash of a needle, and suddenly he knew the meaning of that little red spot on her arm. He set the glass before her, and resumed his seat.

"You must forgive me," he said in a low voice, "for not considering your position. I—you see, this is the biggest thing that has ever come into my life. I—I never loved any woman before. I was only thinking of myself—of how to free Rilla from that brute who has no right to her, so I could have her. I see now how selfish I was, and—I'm sorry." He hesitated, aware that the eyes beneath the mascaraed lashes were regarding him with a peculiar fixed stare—half dreamy, half wild. "I—I'm going to Eagle alone," he continued. "There must be a record there of your marriage. It wouldn't be the square thing not to tell you that I'm going to push this bigamy charge, myself—at least, up to the point where I can get an annulment of this second marriage. I won't push the criminal prosecution if I can avoid it. Much as Labrie deserves a good long jail sentence, I—I hope he escapes it—for your sake. So he can make a strike. I can see your point of view, and I hope you see mine."

With the harsh, venomous tones of the woman's words still ringing in his ears, Marsden was totally unprepared to see the

bright lips suddenly quiver. Two great tears welled from her eyes as she leaned suddenly forward upon the table and buried her face in her arms, as her gleaming white shoulders shook with convulsive sobs. Unheeded, the contents of the overturned whiskey glass dribbled from the table top to the floor. "Oh God," she muttered between long, jerky sobs, "if I'd ever had a kid—an' he was just like you——"

There, there," said Marsden soothingly. "Don't cry. I—I didn't mean to make you cry. I—I'll do everything I can to keep Labrie out of jail. All I want is the girl——"

"To hell with Labrie!" cried the woman, raising a wild-eyed, tear-streaked face from her arms. "You couldn't put him in jail, if you tried! We were married by a traveling priest. Two years later the priest died of pneumonia on the Koyukuk. There was no place to record the marriage in

Eagle then—just the trading post and the saloons and the fort. I've got the only paper that will convict Louis Labrie—an' if you try to mix in on this, I'll cache it where no one will ever find it, till I want to use it! Put that in your pipe an' smoke it, kid! I told you life was a crooked game. The cards are stacked against you —an' it's my deal!"

SLOWLY the light died out of Marsden's eyes. "I—I guess you're right," he said in a dull, toneless voice. "Well—I'll be going." Reaching out, he thrust his own untouched glass of liquor toward her. "Drink this," he said. "You—you need it."

"To hell with it," she said roughly. "I hate whiskey! Where are you goin'?"

"Why, to find Labrie. There must be a way, some honorable way, to—to free that girl from his clutches. I'll—I'll go see Corporal Downey."

The woman shook her head. "No good, kid. Labrie's on the American side. Downey couldn't do nothin'. I'm your one bet, kid. Go outside an' wait for me. I've got to go to my room first."

"What?"

"Go on out, like I said. I'll be with you in a few minutes."

"But——"

"Listen—I've changed my mind. I'm goin' with you—see? You an' me are goin' downriver. But we ain't goin' to Eagle. We're turnin' up the Forty Mile, an' on out over your portage!" She paused, and laughed harshly—wildly. "I want to see Louis Labrie!"

The next moment she was gone and, quitting the building, Marsden paced slowly up and down, somberly regarding Front Street in all its early morning ugliness. Somewhere toward the rear of the building a door banged loudly and a moment later a figure joined him on the sidewalk. He had to look twice to recognize the Tanana Belle. Gone was the abbreviated gown of baby blue tulle, gone the silk stockings and the tinseled dancing shoes. And gone the paint and the rouge and the mascara, leaving the face that showed under the brim of the felt hat looking haggard and lined and old. Only the eyes were bright—dark and bright and a trifle wild as they rose to his and she asked, "Where's your canoe?"

The man hesitated as his eyes dropped from the faded face to the flannel shirt, the coarse stroud skirt and the beaded fawnskin leggings and moccasins.

"Are you sure——?" he began, but was interrupted impatiently.

"Yes—I'm sure! I never was so sure in my life. Get goin', kid. Hit out for the canoe. Don't stand there starin'."

ABRUPTLY Marsden crossed the street and, closely followed by the woman, struck into a little used path that wound among the tall weeds and half-completed cabins, down past the saw-mill toward the river.

As they swung past an occupied cabin in which a light burned, the door opened suddenly, and three men stepped out. Marsden swiftly averted his face as he recognized Camillo Bill, Old Bettles and Moosehide Charlie, and with the woman following closely upon his heels, hurried on to the river.

Old Bettles passed a hand slowly across his eyes, and reaching into the side pocket of his coat, produced a bottle of whiskey, removed the cork, and took a long pull. Solemnly he faced the others.

"Did you boys see what I think I seen?" he asked. "Er mebbe I been lookin' too long at them cards."

Moosehide Charlie nodded, speechless, and Camillo Bill's voice rumbled through his beard. "Jack Marsden, hittin' fer the river with the Tanana Belle!"

"An' her," breathed Moosehide, "rigged out like a squaw!"

"Moccasins an' beaded leggin's," added Old Bettles, returning the bottle to his pocket.

"He was a damn good kid," ventured Camillo Bill. "I liked him."

"He claimed his luck laid up the Forty Mile," said Moosehide Charlie, gazing down the path where the tall weeds had swallowed up the pair.

"Well," opined Bettles philosophically, "there's a damn sight of difference in luck. An' besides, he ain't yet hit the Forty Mile."

V

AS MARSDEN launched the canoe and loaded her amidships with his blankets and the supplies he had cached in the weeds, the Tanana Belle took her place, kneeling just forward of the duffel.

The downriver journey to Forty Mile called for no particular skill in the management of the canoe, but Marsden noted from the first that the woman was no stranger to the paddle. She would paddle for a while and then for long stretches she would sit staring in silence at the high flung wooded hills, as she rested arms and shoulders from the unaccustomed strain.

Neither thought of breakfast. At noon they landed, Marsden lighted a small fire and they ate a lunch of tea, and bannocks, and bacon. Over the rim of his teacup Marsden surveyed the woman beyond the little fire.

The Tanana Belle intercepted the glance toward her clothes. "They're my own," she vouchsafed. "But it's a hell of a while since I've wore 'em. Maybe if I'd stuck to this kind instead of the others, things would have—might have—worked out different." Marsden was silent and after a lapse of moments, again came the voice of the woman. "There's a hell of a difference, kid—lookin' back from forty-five, an' ahead from twenty. It's too bad you can't get the back view first." The hand that held her teacup rested for a moment on the stroud skirt, and drew involuntarily back from its rough touch. Noting the action she laughed—a laugh that was more of a sneer. "A girl's gone a long ways, kid, when she shrinks from the feel of good honest cloth, ain't she?"

"I wouldn't think too much about what's past and gone," said Marsden gravely. "Maybe everything isn't just as we would have had it. It's what's ahead that counts."

The woman didn't answer. The man tossed the duffel into the canoe, they embarked, and for hours paddled in silence.

CROSSING the river, Marsden headed the light craft into the mouth of the Forty Mile. "It'll be upstream work from here on," he said. "But take it easy. With the water we've got, we'll get along fine with the paddles and poles."

Night found them ten miles up the river. Supper over, Marsden cut spruce boughs and spread his blankets upon the bed under

the little shelter tarp. "You sleep there," he said, and turned from the fire.

"An' where do you sleep?" asked the woman, noting that he had spread his only two blankets.

"Oh, anywhere'll do me. I'll cut some branches and Siwash it here in the brush."

The woman tossed him one of the blankets. "Don't be a fool, kid. I've Siwashed it myself a many and many a time. Roll in the other side of the fire. That blanket'll keep the chill off."

Without argument the man obeyed—and when he awoke in the morning, the Tanana Belle had breakfast going.

During all the next day they toiled steadily against the current. And that night they again slept rolled in their blankets, one on either side of the fire. On the morning of the day following, Marsden scanned the country.

"We ought to make the landing by mid-afternoon," he said. "And from there, it's only about two miles to the lake. We should find Labrie before evening."

The woman nodded and made no reply.

ON THE upper reaches of the Forty Mile frequent rapids necessitated track lining. The procedure was simple. The two would land at the foot of a shallow rapid, the woman stepping ashore and following along the bank, while Marsden took the painter, and waded upstream hauling the canoe.

As the day wore on he noted a growing restlessness in the woman's actions, but more particularly in her talk. She asked more and more frequently how soon they would arrive at the portage. The man felt vaguely uneasy. He noted a growing thickness in her speech, and a certain restrained excitement in her eyes that darted this way and that, their pupils drawn to pin points. What would happen, he wondered, when this woman faced Louis Labrie?

It was with a feeling of distinct relief that he finally swung the canoe shoreward and landed at the foot of the portage.

Drawing the craft from the water, Marsden cached most of the supplies, and made up a light pack. He could return for the rest of the stuff later. Unable to brook any delay, the Tanana Belle had started up the steep trail. He soon overtook her as she scrambled up the rocky ridge.

At the summit of the first steep climb, both paused for breath, and the man noted that the woman's eyes glowed with a strange fixed stare, and that her chest heaved in short, quick stabs.

"Take it easy," he cautioned. "There are two more climbs, and the last one is steepest of all."

"I ain't tired. A little short winded—that's all. Come on—let's go!"

The second ascent was made with less effort, and Marsden found himself put to it to keep up with the figure that flitted on ahead, her soft moccasins making no sound on the hard flat rock and scarcely

a track in the marshy stretches between. She crossed the springy place nimbly upon his fallen timbers, and slipped into the scrub. Closely following, Marsden drew up suddenly only a few paces behind her. She had halted in her tracks, and the man saw her whole body stiffen as she stood at the edge of the patch of scrub, her eyes fixed upon the figure of a man who was easing a canoe down the steep cat-climb from the summit.

REACHING the level the man eased his burden to the ground and stood erect for a moment to remove his hat and mop at his brow with a big blue bandana. Marsden's glance swept past the woman

and came to rest upon the other. He was a huge figure, handsome, in a bold flashy way—with his face smooth shaven save for a heavy black mustache that hid his lips and curved arrogantly, almost fiercely upward toward his eyes.

There was a swift movement, and the woman stepped out into the open and crossed the narrow clearing with the lithe, gliding motion of a panther.

Marsden saw the man's eyes suddenly widen as he froze in his position—hat in one hand, bandana in the other—widen and fix in a look that might be fear, or fury upon the figure that confronted him scarce two short paces away.

"Good God—Belle! You! What the hell you doin' here?"

The woman laughed—a wild, shrill laugh. "Doin' here? I came to see my—husband! Who's got a better right to be here, Louis? You don't seem glad to see me. I hear you've got a new woman—beautiful, an' young! I hope you kissed her good-by, Louis! 'Cause you're goin' away with me. It's a long trail we're hittin', Louis—an' we'll be a long time gone!"

"Belle! My God—your eyes! You're hopped up, Belle! Come out of it! Come out of it, I say! Or by God, I'll——" The bandana fluttered to the ground, and the hand that held it flew swiftly to the open front of his shirt.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Marsden stood frozen in his tracks as the four shots blazed in rapid succession from the muzzle of a gun held scarcely three feet from Labrie's chest. He saw the big man reel backward, a look of horror on his face. Then turning half around, as though to fly from the searing volley of lead, he sagged slowly at the knees and crashed heavily forward. For a moment the Tanana Belle stood motionless—frozen in her tracks with the pistol still outthrust in her hand.

Then, with a shrill peal of hysterical laughter, she threw herself forward upon the prostrate form, from beneath which a crimson stream was already reddening the flat rock upon which he lay. Turning the head sidewise, she kissed the pallid dead cheek passionately—fiercely. "I love you, Louis!" she cried wildly. "You're the only man I ever could love! Wait for me, Louis, I'm coming!"

LEAPING to her feet, she whirled to face Marsden who stood rooted in his tracks at the horror of it. "I done yer job for you, kid!" she screamed. "You can have yer woman, now. By God, he'll never have her! He's my man—mine, do you hear? Bury us close together, kid! Bury us in one grave! I'm through—through! I've seen the whole show. An' it's been a damned rotten show—from the seat I had. To hell with it all! They'll never hang me for murder."

Swiftly the gun rose till its muzzle came to rest against her right temple. Marsden sprang forward to the edge of the scrub. A dozen yards across the tiny clearing, the woman's eyes smiled into his horror stricken face.

"Don't!" he cried. "Stop!"

"Yer too late, kid. Good-by an'—good luck!"

The shot rang out before Marsden had cleared half the distance that separated them, and without a sound, the woman's body slumped to earth across the prostrate body of the man. A nickel-plated, pearl-handled gun clattered upon the hard flat rock, and came to rest against a gaudily beaded moccasin.

VI

MINUTES passed as Marsden stood gazing down upon the two still forms. His hands clenched, and upon the rock beside the bodies, the shiny pistol seemed strangely blurred with the beads of red, and blue, and amber.

A sound brought him to his senses—the sound of tiny stones rattling down the rocky face of the cliff. A moment later a figure appeared, half sliding, half falling down the steep cat-climb, and almost be-

fore he realized it, the girl stood beside him. He knew that her eyes traveled swiftly from his own empty hands to the two bodies, and came to rest upon the nickel-plated gun.

He was the first to find his voice. "How," he asked with a calm that surprised himself, "did he happen to be here —so soon after you'd gone in?"

"Your claim," she answered. "He was going to jump your claim. He read the date on the notice, and saw that you hadn't kept up your assessment work. He was going down to Eagle to re-locate it. I was following with the pack. When I heard the shots, I threw it off and hurried. I—I thought—I was afraid that you'd come back—and he'd killed you." Her eyes shifted to the body of the woman, and rose suddenly to search his own. "Who is she?" she asked suddenly, almost hysterically. "And—why did she come here—with you?"

"She's his wife, dear," he said simply. "She loved him. She hated him, too. But she loved him more than she hated."

"His wife!" cried the girl, her eyes widening in horror. "But I'm his wife. We were married in——"

"He was already married to her," explained Marsden gravely. "But it doesn't matter now, dear. Nothing matters." The next moment he was drawing her close against his pounding heart. "They've gone away together, darling—and left us alone on our portage."

Along the Right of Way At——

One Minute After Midnight

By WILLIAM EDWARD HAYES

Author of "Hell for Ransom," "Banjo Boy," and Other Railroading Stories

DETECTIVE SERGEANT DAN HOWELL, of the railroad police, sat at the skipper's desk in Conductor Mose Hand's caboose. Dan was hunched over a sheet of writing paper. Several lines were scrawled there. It was a letter to his daughter. It was hard for him to write a letter, and those several lines represented an hour of labor. The caboose rumbled and creaked and groaned. Now and then it rocked when the engineman hit 'em up a little. That didn't help writing either.

Dan looked up from the sheet. On the wall in front of the desk was a notice of reward. It showed the front view and the profile of a youngish gentleman with an egg-shaped head, a hair line mustache and a killer's eye. The name beneath the picture was Dirk Guyon. The United States of America wanted him. Mr.

Guyon had interfered with the orderly movement of mails and had done a little killing when somebody got in his way. Uncle Sam wanted Mr. Guyon dead or alive.

Having fled Chicago, shooting his way out of a trap, Guyon had been reported at various points in the Northwest. A wide net had been spread for him. Twice he had been nearly captured. Twice he had left death behind him.

Dan frowned at the chisel-sharp features. He turned back to his letter. He read what he had written. Under the salutation of "Dear Margie," were these words, "Don't believe all you see in the papers. You have a good time and do not worry about me. I sent you away to that camp to have a good time and not to worry. This fellow Guyon you read so much about in the papers does not mean anything in my life. Right now I am riding a merchandise freight train west just to see nobody cracks a seal and steals something. You know as well as I do that nothing much ever happens to us railroad bulls so——"

Dan rubbed his dominant beak of a nose, pursed his straight lips and picked up his pen again. He hunched over the paper. His profile in the lamplight was sharp with something hawklike about it. He stared at the paper. The conductor came down the iron steps from the cupola, leaned over the desk.

Dan saw him take an envelope from the corner. The skipper tore the envelope open.

"New time card," the skipper said. He laid it in front of Dan. "Takes effect at 12:01 A. M." Then, after the manner of railroaders, he took out his watch, held it down to Dan. "What's your turnip say?"

Dan took out his watch. "Right now, 11:59," Dan said.

"Check," the skipper said. He took the new time card and climbed aloft.

Dan put his pen to the letter.

LIKE a long black shadow in the cloying velvet of the sultry summer night, an eastward train streaked out of Juba Pass behind the silver beam of the engine's headlight. In the time card the train was designated as No. 20. The men on the road called it The Ghost because it carried no passengers and did not appear in the time tables you got at the passenger depots. It was faster than anything that railroad had on wheels and even the proudest limiteds got off the main line for it. It consisted this night of seven mail cars and a coach tacked on behind for the conductor and his crew.

The forward mail cars were dark. Through stuff in the parcels post class, bound for Chicago. The fourth and fifth cars were lighted. In them toiled the hurried clerks at the long racks against the walls where pouches hung.

One of the clerks in the fourth car was Smiley. He was an old man with humorous eyes, a bald head and a foul pipe. Sawyer was his partner. Sawyer was young and exuberant, and took his job seriously.

Smiley, as The Ghost whipped out of Juba Pass, locked the register pouch. He had signed for some valuable stuff at Mission City, and since it was registered for Chicago, he had had to open the already heavy Chicago pouch. Now it was locked again and all the bookkeeping was caught up.

Smiley straightened, wiped the sweat from his furrowed brow. He put a match flame to the pipe, sucked on it noisily. His eyes, peering beyond the flame gazed absently at the reward notice some other clerk had pasted up on the car's steel wall. Smiley wasn't thinking at the moment about gentlemen with egg-shaped heads and murderous intentions. He was thinking about Katie, his wife, and the surprise he was going to hand her in the morning. He called down the steel aisle to Sawyer. The youngster came up quickly.

"Take a look, Jack," Smiled said. He drew a package from his locker. The cord

was loose on it. He opened the lid and the light from above caught in new silver.

"Hot damn," Jack said. He grinned at Smiley. "Cream pitcher, sugar bowl an' little silver tray."

"Twenty-five years double headin'," Smiley said. "Twenty-five years tomorrow. Katie don't even know I got it." He chuckled silently, like a small boy getting ready a surprise for teacher.

"Hope I'm as nuts about Annie when I'm tied up twenty-five years," the younger man said. "Big party tomorrow, eh?"

"All the kids an' the grandchildren." Smiley sucked at his pipe. He put the lid back on the box, laid the box on the edge of his sorting table.

THERE was a sudden roaring beneath the car frame, a quick check of speed. Smiley looked at his watch. He went over to the half open side door and peeked out. He frowned and looked at his watch again. It was 11:59. The Ghost was coming down to a flying stop.

Sawyer called, "What the hell we stoppin' out here for?" The Ghost had no more scheduled stops on the division.

The old man suddenly grinned. "New time card," he answered. "Plumb forgot about it. This is Siwash. Been due by here on the fly at 11:59 regular, but this new time card makes it 12:02 A. M. We gotta stop an' wait for time to catch up with us." He knocked his pipe out and turned from the door.

The train came down until the pilot of the engine was within a dozen yards of the east switch of the Siwash siding. There it stopped. The steam, shut out of the cylinders, blasted through the double pops on the engine's dome. The roar came back as far as where Smiley worked.

Smiley bent over the sorting table. His old pipe protruded from his jaw. Young Sawyer was farther up the aisle. Neither man saw the shadow that suddenly materialized into a dark hatted human at the door. Neither was aware of that ominous presence until the cool voice said quietly:

"Keep your eyes on the wall, you two! Put your hands up where I can see 'em!"

Smiley whirled. He forgot self, forgot Katie and that silver present. The Chicago registered pouch was large in his mind. He had a quick photograph on his brain of deadly eyes, a peculiarly shaped face with high bones in the cheeks, a hair line of mustache above the thin lips. He took all this in—fast. Even the nerveless fingers clutching the gun leveled at them both.

Moving with the speed of light, Smiley's old right hand drew the gun in the holster strapped to his thigh.

The engine whistle blasted into the flagman's call. It was a minute after midnight.

The car suddenly seemed to explode. Fire spat. Smoke curled up. Three guns spoke almost simultaneously. One spoke twice.

DETECTIVE SERGEANT DAN HOWELL'S pen was in the middle of the word "worry." He had three letters of it down. The pen was on the upstroke to make the fourth. It was about the 'steenth time he'd used the word in this letter to his daughter.

On the upstroke the pen suddenly made a wild swipe across the paper. Dan, not expecting any comedy relief on the part of the engineer, was totally unprepared for the sudden application of the air brakes in full emergency. Dan was hurled out of his chair and slid half the length of the caboose on the seat of his pants. He bumped his head and his hat was crushed down on it. He heard Mose Hand, the skipper, calling on Deity to consign all foolish locomotive engineers to a place where wailing and gnashing of teeth should be their only pastime.

The conductor and Detective Sergeant Howell met in the middle of the caboose and then ran for the back porch. Dan got his hat off his eyes and realized the freight train was motionless. He looked

ahead through the inky pall and saw a lantern near the depot platform of Soncy making peculiar motions. He stared at it a moment and then realized that somebody carrying that lantern was running hell-bent toward him.

He dropped to the ground and went forward, the conductor at his heels. They could see the signal light in the semaphore. It was red.

The Soncy telegrapher, pale and staring, met them. His breathing was labored. He called as he approached:

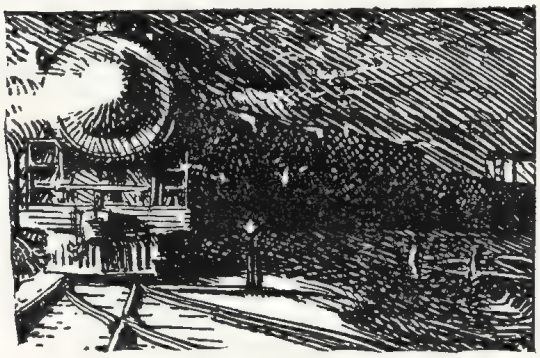
"Howell! Is—H o w e l l—on—this—drag?"

"What the hell's happenin'!" Dan demanded. He held his light on the operator's features.

"The Ghost," the man sputtered. "Robbed—at—Siwash. Tw—two men dead. Mail. Old Man wants—you—on telephone."

Dan covered the distance to the telegraph office with the grace of a lean cat. The engineer was back from the locomotive and was full of questions.

"What the hell's the idea of that crazy



operator throwin' the red eye right in my face?" the engineer demanded.

Dan attempted no answer. He snatched up the double headset of the operator's main line phone circuit, adjusted the receiver to his ears. He stepped on the foot button and told the dispatcher to put Superintendent Mayhew on. He glanced up at the wall clock and saw that it was exactly 12:06 A. M.

"Let's have it," Dan spat as Mayhew's gruff voice came into his ears.

"I'm giving your engine orders to cut and run for it from Soncy," the Old Man said. "Haven't got much details yet. The Ghost's conductor called in at 12:04 from the Siwash switch telephone box and said Mail Clerk Smiley and his partner, young Sawyer, had been stuck up, shot to death and robbed of the Chicago and the St. Paul registered pouches. Just how it happened, and how they found it out so quick is all a mystery to me and I ain't got time to inquire. I'm givin' The Ghost orders to proceed to Big Wolf. You take your engine an' caboose an' tear out for Big Wolf to meet 'em. Do all you can. Then you let me know."

"Wait a minute," Dan spat. "How about the county officers? If poor old Smiley——"

"The Ghost's conductor's taking care of those details. You meet The Ghost at Big Wolf, like I said."

IT WAS still a long run to the meeting point, but Dan met The Ghost as ordered. He reached the Big Wolf passenger platform at a little after three. Big Wolf was the county seat of the district in which Siwash was located. The sheriff and the coroner had met the mail train and had conducted such investigation as was possible under the circumstances.

Under Dan's brief questioning, The Ghost's conductor told what he knew.

"I don't know much," he said, nervously. "We came down to Siwash at 11:59 as per the old schedule and had to wait for the new one. We stood a couple minutes. I was back in the coach with my crew. Finally the engine whistled in the flagman and he gave the head end the sign to go. We hardly turned our wheels over until the air went on in full emergency. It went on so sudden it like to broke my back. Scooted me halt down the aisle on my ear."

Dan smoked his cigarette slowly, watching the conductor intently.

"I got my lantern an' run ahead on the right-hand side of the train. I ran up the track to the engine. I heard the air making a noise like the train line was open so I thought maybe we busted a hose. The engineer asked me why I pulled the air on him, and then we both started back the left-hand side of the train to see what was wrong.

"We come to the fourth mail car. The door was part open. We looked in." The skipper's voice broke.

"Come an' show me," Dan said.

They climbed into the death car. Dan took a quick look around. Smiley and the youngster were laid out together near the door. Sawyer had been shot through the head, right between the eyes.

"How about Smiley?" Dan queried. "The bullet didn't finish him off right away." Dan rose from examination of the wound through the lung.

"He lived perhaps three minutes," the coroner offered.

"Conscious?" Dan snapped. He whirled on the skipper. "How'd you find him?"

"Here." The skipper walked over to the sorting table. "It was Old Smiley who stopped us. When I looked in—the engineer an' me—here was Smiley with his eyes open an' no sight in 'em, hanging with one hand to the pull cord that opened the emergency air valve. You heard of death grips. That's what he had on the rope."

"He did," the coroner said. "I had to break it. I know."

Dan looked over the car. Smiley had been mortally wounded trying to defend his mail. The robber, or robbers, evidently had shot down both men quickly, grabbed the registered stuff, jumped off. It was obvious that Smiley, with the last thread of consciousness, had concentrated on stopping the train and sounding the alarm. He had stopped it almost before it had got started. But his lips never moved again.

Dan blew his nose. He questioned the engineer. That gentleman could add nothing to the conductor's testimony. He had seen exactly what the skipper had seen.

Dan walked up and down the car. "How about trying to find which way the robbers went?" he suddenly demanded.

"We did all we could," the skipper said. "The engineer ran for a telephone while I was talking to the super. The brakeman and the mail clerks from the other cars cut a wide circle around the train. They couldn't see anybody, and yet we were at that mail car door not two minutes after the robbers had got out of it with the loot."

"Didn't hear any automobiles start up?" Dan insisted.

"You ought to know Siwash better than that."

Dan knew Siwash and his frown deepened. It was not much of a town. The only road near it was a back country road the farmers used to bring grain to the elevator. Right now that road happened to be hub deep in mud. Even an automobile with chains would find it hard to get through. A horse could make it.

Siwash consisted of the red sign board with white letters which told the name of the place, the grain elevator, the siding on which cars loaded at the elevator were rolled down under their own momentum to be picked up by the freight trains. There was no depot, no telegraph office. There were only a few scattered houses, a general store. It was a place that would be dead in the middle of the night.

The sheriff said, "Whoever it was we'll have 'em by daylight. I got word of the holdup at 12:05. By ten minutes later I had posses organized in the four surroundin' counties, all movin' in toward Siwash. I got in touch with the federal dicks at the capital. They say it's Dirk Guyon. It can't be nobody else."

"Guyon!" Dan spat the word. His fingers tensed. His breathing became shallower. His nostrils twitched.

"An' he's in our net right now, Mr. Howell," the sheriff boasted. "Unless he got away from the scene in a airplane an'

you know there ain't a spot in a twenty mile radius where a plane could land. I reckon, by this minute, there's three hundred men closin' in on this section, an' the governor says we can have troops if we need 'em."

"You'll need Michael an' his Angels if Guyon pulled the job," Dan shot out. He walked up and down the car again. The glitter of light in new silver caught his eye. He stooped and picked up a small sugar bowl. He held it up staring.

"What the hell?" He looked at the skipper.

"Smiley," the skipper said. "There was three pieces. He showed it to me up the line tonight. He was gonna give it to his wife tomorrow. Silver wedding day." The skipper sniffed and rubbed the back of his hand across his nose.

Dan looked about hurriedly. "Where's the rest of it?"

"Cream pitcher an' tray," the skipper said. "Had a funny little handle, that pitcher did. More like a hook. Like them on the sugar bowl. See? Them handles don't fasten to the bowl at the bottom of the loop. Just sort of curl out from the top. That's the way the pitcher was, only there was one handle. The tray——"

"Here's the tray," a brakeman said. He picked it up reverently.

When they couldn't find the pitcher Dan dismissed it from his mind. "Mose," he said to his own conductor, "you get orders to take me to Siwash. Ain't any use holdin' up The Ghost longer. I'll call you, Sheriff, from Siwash an' find out what the posses discover—if anything."

IT WAS three-thirty when Dan's engine and caboose got away from Big Wolf. Dan rode the engine, hanging in the gangway. He didn't want anybody to talk to him. He wanted to think.

Dirk Guyon! It was incredible that the railroad had come face to face with the desperado. He recalled the letter he had been writing to his daughter. He hoped the conductor would save the sheet. No use losing the effort he'd thus far put into it. He had been telling her not to worry. Maybe he had been speaking out of turn.

Dirk Guyon! Dan had a picture in his mind of the peculiar head, the dished-in nose, the high cheek bones and the hair line above the lips. The man with a charmed life. That time in Oklahoma when seventy deputies thought they had him bottled up in a cabin. Guyon had shot it out with them and had escaped. Then the battle in the southside Chicago flat. Even the federals had been in on that, but Guyon had eluded them after killing a half dozen in the siege.

Dan shuddered and sucked in the sultry air. His shoulders hunched up. He thought of Smiley, the little pieces of silver, the wife who would mark her silver anniversary with the formidable black of crepe on the front door. He thought of young Sawyer and the girl-wife who even now was probably sobbing over the cradle of her fatherless infant. His hands went into claws. He had faced crime in all its guises. He had cracked some pretty tough ones, but if this were Guyon he was up against now——

The light engine and caboose rolled around a bend and came in sight of Kinlock. The red light was out against them. They eased up the tracks to the depot. A long freight train was in the siding, an eastward job the light engine was scheduled to meet here.

Dan saw the crowd on the platform. Lights swarmed over the cars in the siding, on top and underneath. Dan dropped to the platform and found a deputy whom he knew. He ran up to him.

"Nothin's gettin' through us this night," the deputy explained. "Not even the railroad. I got fifty men combin' this train with a fine tooth comb, I have. We got the road blocked on the west, too."

"Heard anything from the men on the highways?" Dan asked.

"Nothin' only they ain't lettin' anybody by 'em, even if they know the people in the autos. It's Dirk Guyon an' his gang,

Dan'l, an' we're takin' him even we have to make a sieve outta him to do it. Guess we'll look you over before we let you in."

A deputy came running up. He spoke to the chief. "All seals check on the loads," the man said. "We double-checked 'em, an' four men searched each empty."

"Let 'em get outta town," the chief deputy spat.

Dan ran for his caboose.

DAN reached Siwash in the first flush of dawn. His heart was in his boots. He surveyed the desolate station from his perch in the engine gangway. The houses were beginning to show life. The grain elevator loomed ghostly in the lifting mists. The siding was deserted.

His first move was to circle the scene of the holdup widely. The recent rains had left the ground soft and muddy. He went along the track to a point about equivalent to the length of a city block west of where he left his engine. Here he started northward over the fields. He didn't miss an inch of ground. He made a complete circle and got back to his starting point.

Dan's scowl was savage. He stood looking at the gravel ballast. The thing just didn't make sense. If Guyon and his gang came in by auto they would have had to come in a week before. That was out. If they came in by foot, they would have had to leave tracks. If they came in by wagon——

Dan got the elevator superintendent at his house across the tracks. The man came to the door in his underwear with a short night shirt pulled over it.

"Ain't a feller ever gonna get any sleep?" the man whined. "Woke up last night by your engineerman puttin' in telephone calls an' then the sheriff——"

Dan questioned the man while he got into his clothes. Yes, the man said, there had been any number of farmers up to the elevator during the week. Yes, he knew them all. No, there was no possible chance for any strangers to slip in that way. Yes, he had answered all such questions to the sheriff and he and the neighbors, what few there were, had got out and searched every barn and shed after the robbery but could tell Dan nothing.

Dan insisted on a thorough search of the elevator and its buildings. The elevator boss led the way. They covered every square foot of space inside and out. Nothing. Not a clue.

In desperation Dan turned to the siding. He scrutinized the gravel. The light was getting stronger, and there was an indication that the sun might break through later. He studied the spot where the mail car, as nearly as he could guess, had come to a stop. He measured back the distance from the east switch to find it. Again he started to go around in circles. Then he stopped, the breath dead in his throat. Something glittered in the weeds at the edge of the siding ties.

Dan bent over it, picked it up gingerly. It was the cream pitcher to the wedding anniversary set. The handle was slightly bent. There was every indication that the little hook-like handle had caught into something. Threads. Perhaps a man's sleeve. Perhaps a raveled place on the canvas mail pouch. You couldn't tell now. But this pitcher couldn't get where Dan found it unless somebody had hurled it. He carefully wrapped his handkerchief about it. There might be fingerprints.

Like a hound on a scent, he bent closer, his eyes glued on every cinder. He threshed around for other signs. Anything. A footprint, a cigarette——

"Hey! What the hell's this?"

Dan turned to see the mill boss holding a metal band. It was about three inches long. One edge was cut straight across, the other was ragged. Dan came up to him.

The band was a piece of car seal. "Where'd you get that?" Dan snapped.

The man pointed. "There. Looks like —hell, it is. It's one of mine. It's one ——"

"Your numbers?" Dan pointed. Color had mounted his cheeks. His eyes were narrowed down with fire behind the lashes. There were three numbers left on the piece. They were "729." There had been other numerals in front of these.

"Lemme look."

DAN followed the man to the mill office. The man opened a book. He pointed to a scribbled line.

"See?" His voice was pitched high. "I loaded four cars yestiddy. Grain consigned for Chicago. I used seals with serials numbers from 27722 to 27730. If this is part of one of them."

Dan grabbed down the seals that hung on a hook above the desk. The first one out was 27731. He thumbed through the metal bands hurriedly and then stopped abruptly.

"Look! Here's one missin'." The serial number skipped deep in the batch. There was 27763 and the next was 27765. "What you got to say now?" Dan demanded savagely.

The man looked up from the record book.

"Nothin' except if this piece of broken

seal is my 27729, then that seal was ripped offa grain box car number——"

Dan wasn't waiting for the man to stammer out the words. Things were running through his mind now with light speed. He made a quick note of the initial and number of the car which was supposed to have the seal part of which was broken.

"Quick," Dan said. "Those four cars. Were they here last night when The Ghost stopped?"

"I reckon. No. 652 usually picks 'em up. 'Bout one-thirty or so——"

Dan was running. He left the mill man staring after him, breathless.

Reaching the engine, the startled conductor rose from his seat on the gravel ballast.

"That was 652 we met back at Big Wolf, wasn't it?" Dan cried.

"Yeh."

Dan said, "Let's get this caboose with the engine ahead of it an' race back to overtake that freight."

"You don't mean, Dan——"

"Hell yes!" Dan spat. He said to himself. "They covered it with a fine tooth comb."

RED semaphore and washout stop signals greeted the backing engine and the bouncing caboose as it swooped down on Big Wolf.

The chief deputy whose job it was to stop all trains, freight and passenger, and make a search came running up.

Dan said, "Gimme three or four good men. Load 'em on the caboose."

The deputy shouted questions, but Dan was in the telegraph office talking to Superintendent Mayhew on the train wire phone.

Train No. 652, the super said, was just now passing Soncy. No, it had no scheduled stops for the next hour or so. Yes, Dan could have a clear track, but why in the hell, if he suspected the robbers to be aboard, didn't he let Mr. Mayhew have the train stopped somewhere and have some officers on hand to——

"You gimme a clear track," Dan spouted. "I ain't takin' any chance of this bird, whoever he is, gettin' away again. An' whatever you do, don't stop that train anywhere. Keep it movin' even if you have to put passenger trains in the hole."

Dan got his clear track. The chief deputy and about five others crawled aboard the caboose, still trying to find out some-

thing. Dan perched himself up on the back of the coal pile and rode into the wind. The train moved a good deal like the wind, only faster. The deputy grouched about the mystery.

Dan tried to spit and became conscious of speed. Spitting is one thing you can't do when you're sitting in the wind rolling about eighty.

They came in sight of the long freight train's red caboose just as it was shoving up Goose Hill. Dan stood up and the engineer pinched 'em down to a steadier pace. The freight train's conductor evidently figured on a rear end collision. Dan saw him scramble out on the back of the caboose with his flagman, and the two of them stood there making wild signs to stop. But Dan's engineer kept on coming and the skipper and his flagman set themselves on the back porch steps for a leap into the ditch.

Dan put his lips to Mose Hand's ear. He yelled at his conductor, "We'll couple in and then I'm goin' over ahead on top of that freight train. You tell that deputy and his men to stay back here until I give 'em a sign to come forward. Get that?"

Mose nodded.

"Tell that deputy that when I stand on the roof of a box car and wave my arms up an' down, to get their guns out an' get ready to run along the gravel. I won't give the sign until we come to the crossin' at Bartlow where we have to come to a stop. When we stop there we won't start again till we see if we've got 'em. I don't want these yahoos clutterin' up the tops of this train."

Mose assured Dan his orders would be carried out.

Just about then the backing engine eased gently into train No. 652's caboose and hooked on.

Dan didn't waste time with the freight train's boss. He asked where the Siwash pick-up was located in the train. The conductor consulted the book and told him.

"Gor-a'mighty," the conductor grumbled. "We get stopped an' pawed over once, an' then here you come givin' a man heart failure."

Dan didn't take time to retort. He climbed to the caboose roof. The train was creeping up to the summit. He sighted along the swaying tops, and started forward. He went from car to car with the ease of a cat. He counted off the cars as he went.

HE CAME to a big box car, and the number registered in his brain. His heart was in his mouth. He leaped to the top of it and dried his palms against his coat. He moved on tiptoe, making no sound. It was broad daylight, yet he used as much caution as if night cloaked him. Making his way to the center of the car, he caught hold of the eaves and leaned far over.

He could make out the numbers on the seal. The numerals were those of the one missing in the elevator man's batch. In other words, in the night the original seal had been broken off this door, the door opened, and somebody or some thing put inside. The car had then been sealed up again.

Making his way to the forward end he looked down at the end door. He still couldn't make out how the job had been done. A man couldn't get in a car of grain this way and pull a door shut and put a seal through the hasp on the outside. The only way you could do that was to have somebody. . . .

Dan heard no sound, and yet suddenly there was searing pain along the back of his supporting hand, and blood showed gushing. He jerked his hand when the bullet hit and started falling forward. He saw, in a split second, the gray blur of backward-rushing gravel between the car on which he had been perched, and the low-sided steel gondola ahead of it. The gondola contained some sort of machinery covered with tarpaulin. A man was crouched by the covering with a smoking gun in his hand.

All this Dan saw as he fell. Then he reached out with his good right hand. He was going down head first and the hand was below him. He grabbed at a rung of the end ladder. He missed one, caught another. He held on grimly while his body flipped over and he got his feet down, his heels hanging against the end of the box car. His heels caught in a ladder rung before his arm could take the full weight of his body. There was only one thing to do.

Again he saw the crouching man. Again he saw the gun brought up. The flame showed. The train lurched on a curve. Wood splintered at Dan's side.

HE COULDN'T get to his own gun holding on with his right hand that way. He made a dive for it. He spread his long legs. He got onto the rim of the gondola, gave a shove with the other and went into the low car toward the crouching figure like a flying hawk swooping down on his prey.

The gun barked for the third time as the two bodies collided. A bullet turned away on Dan's shoulder. He could taste the powder in his mouth. He grabbed the attacker. He felt the man's wet clothes as he struggled for the gun. He got the gun and broke the man's hold on it. The wet clothes worried him. There had been no rain in the night.

And then, as Dan's right fist smashed into the cursing mouth, it came to him. No wonder the searchers had found nobody on the train. This man evidently had sealed his fellows in the grain car, and then had taken refuge in the water tank on the tender. It would be easy for a tall man to hide in there. Nobody would ever look.

Fighting with desperation, Dan got the man's fingers from his throat. He tried a body jab, staggered the desperado back. He realized he was bleeding freely and this had to be quick.

One last swing, now. One fierce smash. He started it at his wobbly knees. His right knuckles took the man on the chin. The man staggered back against the shrouded machinery. Dan got his throat and slammed the head against the steel side of the car. The man slumped at his feet. And then Dan slumped.

The sudden application of air brakes had thrown Dan from his feet. It also saved his life.

He saw, suddenly, the whole rim of the car's end door open up. He heard the clatter of a machine gun from inside the grain car. The lookout's three bullets into the side of that car evidently had given the alarm.

Dan got his gun and crouched. He got as near the end door as he could. There was blood in his eyes from a gash over his forehead where the gunman had clouted him.

The end door of the grain car fell away. The muzzle of the machine gun poked through. And then Dan saw a caved in nose, a pair of killer's eyes, a thin line of hair above the upper lip. Almost immediately the eyes found him and Dan's gun spoke. He didn't know how many might be in that car, but he'd stick until they mowed him down.

He saw the startled light in the killer's eyes, saw the killer's gun flash smoke. But the bullet went wild, pinging along the steel floor of the cab. Then the machine gun was trained on him, and he had to take cover behind the machinery.

Dirk Guyon, bleeding profusely, staggered through the small door, steadied himself, and then dropped to the ground. Three men followed quickly. The last came with the machine gun firing. Dan leaped from his hiding place, climbed the side of the gondola. Guyon whirled on him, his gun coming up. Dan's gun barked, the outlaw's fell from a fist made lifeless by a shattered wrist.

Then the Thompson subber was swinging on him, and Dan tried to slip down. Bullets clipped the frosty hair at his

temple. He heard shots along the train. He felt suddenly very tired and sat down where he was. He fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette.

DAN sat over the desk in Mose Hand's caboose. He wore several yards of bandages, but his right hand was free. He held a pen.

Mose said, "Danged good thing the chief deputy got anxious an' had the conductor on that train pull the air an' stop it. Otherwise you'da been a sieve."

"Not much short of one right now," Dan mumbled. He didn't feel exactly pert. "We got the boys. That's all that matters. That Dirk was a slick one—had it all figgered out nice. Knew about the new time table, the fact the mail would stop where it did, an' the swell chance he stood runnin' through all the John Laws in the country sealed up in a grain car."

"One thing he didn't figger on," Mose said, putting a match to his pipe.

"What?"

"Guy by the name uh Howell." Mose turned and climbed the iron ladder to the cupola.

Dan turned to his interrupted letter. He tried to rub out the line made when the sudden stop had come considerably earlier. Then he read what he had written. Finally, "So have a good time now," he scrawled to his daughter, "and don't believe all you see in the papers. You know I been in this work a long time, and nothing has happened to me yet. So you be good and I will take a week off sometime and come up to that camp to visit you." He signed it "Sincerely" and folded it slowly. His eyes fell on the remnants of a little silver wedding gift on the corner of the table. His nose twitched suddenly. He rubbed his nostrils vigorously.

There's a Difference Between Seeing Red and Being Ready—for Trouble

TEMPER

By BENNETT FOSTER

Author of "Caballeros," "The Law Comes East," etc.

OLD MAN JONSTONE waved the check gently in the air, drying it, and, thus occupied, addressed himself to Billy Worth.

"It ain't that I don't value yore services, Billy," he said dryly. "Yo're as good a boy as I've had breakin' horses on the Y Bar. It's just that I cain't approve of yore temper at times. Whippin' Clark Bent all over the little horse pasture with a pair of bridle reins might be called boyish play by some, but when a man turns the reins around an' smacks down my cowboss with the bit end, that's gettin' beyond the playful stage. I'd call hittin' a man with a big Spanish bit a real honest effort to get rid of him."

Billy Worth spoke in his own defense. "I'd ought to of shot Bent," he said regretfully. "I wasted an awful lot of sweat showin' him the error of his ways. He

climbed on that Loafer horse an' gigged him with his spurs an' when Loafer bucked him off he kicked the horse in the belly an' started to abuse him around the head. That ain't no way for a man to do."

Old Man Jonstone proffered the now dry check. "Doubtless," he said. "Loafer happens to be a Y Bar horse an' Clark happens to be the Y Bar foreman. Yore efforts at reformin' Clark wasn't appreciated. Here's yore check. I'll give you one piece of advice with it: Learn to keep yore temper. Good-by, Billy."

Billy Worth took the check. His temper, hot and ever ready, showed in his eyes. He thrust the check in his pocket without scanning it.

"Good-by, Mister Jonstone," he said in what he believed to be an even voice, "I'll be seein' you——" The temper got the better of the restrain—"in hell you old goat!" Billy concluded and clumped out of the Y Bar office.

Billy Worth was still mad as he rode the winding road that lay between the Y Bar headquarters and the small cow town of Cultus. To Billy, hazing his pack horse along, it seemed that the whole thing was unjust, unfair, and a very personal matter indeed. Here he, William W. Worth, had been engaged in turning out a string of horses for Old Man Jonstone, just starting out and doing a mighty good job of it too, and the first rattle out of the box he'd been fired. Of course Clark Bent was cowboss for the Y Bar. Of course Clark felt that he had a right to do anything he wanted to do within reason, but it seemed to Billy Worth that kicking a horse in the belly and beating said horse over the head was all out of reason. Then Clark had run to the Old Man with the grief. Of course Clark's head was bandaged where the big bit had hit, and there were welts and bruises on his face but if he had been any sort of a man he'd have stayed with Billy and settled the difficulty. Then, and this was a sort of anti-climax, the Old Man had referred to Billy's bit as "Spanish." Billy had never ridden a Spanish bit in his life. He used the mildest kind of grazing bit and the Old Man knew it.

So, fuming internally and just as ready to explode as a dynamite cap, Billy Worth arrived in Cultus, put his two horses in the livery barn and went out to cash his check. A hell of a note it was!

BY NINE o'clock that night it was an even more hellish note. During the six hours that had elapsed since his arrival Billy Worth had applied for work with three different ranches and had been turned down by each. He'd cashed the sixty-dollar check that Old Man Jonstone had given him, commenting as he cashed it that it was all he had to show for two months' work. He'd eaten a little and drunk a lot. He'd insulted two good friends and caused a minor enemy to leave town, and he bade fair to become a blight on the fair surface of Cultus's civilization.

A little after nine o'clock, seeking trouble and not being well accommodated, Billy Worth edged himself into a poker game in the back room of the Hoffman Saloon. There were already five players in the game and they did not need a sixth. Billy, pushing his hat back on his black curls, and with his square, unshaven jaw thrust pugnaciously forward, kicked a chair up to the table, brought the remnants of the sixty dollars from his pants and declared himself in the game.

His advent was received in various ways. Bob Carp, the grizzled wagon boss of the Two Bar, lifted bushy gray eyebrows and grunted as he saw that Billy was aching for a fight. Sam Hoffman, the owner of the saloon, shifted his fat bulk in his chair and commented that the game was already full up. Two strangers, both cowmen from their garb and appearance, accepted him after a searching glance; and the blank faced, thin lipped man who was dealing, scanned Billy impassively and pushed out a stack of chips.

For two hours Billy lost, steadily and a little at a time. Poker did not soothe

him, for there was no action in the game. Then, with the blank-faced gambler dealing, Billy decided to create his own diversion.

He had believed for perhaps the last six hands, that the gambler was helping himself from the discards. It is a trick hard to detect and a very good one. After the deal, while the betting is going, the dealer picks up the deck. Then, when cards are drawn, the man with the deck adds the discards to them, leafing them through casually. Generally he can find a pair or two. He sets up the pairs, leaving them on the bottom. When he shuffles he does not disturb the pair. The cut brings the pair up, and by judiciously calling for cards to be "Burnt," the dealer helps himself to the pair. Billy thought the blank-faced man was doing just that thing.

BILLY bided his time, his blue eyes angry and watchful under his black eyebrows. Fat Hoffman had dropped out of the game and was watching. Bob Carp had passed in his hand. One of the strangers had also passed, and the pot, of fair size, lay between Billy, the gambler, and the other stranger. The betting was checked to the gambler who made a modest raise. The stranger quit the hand and Billy called. On the showdown he looked at a full house, queens and tens. The pair of tens had been in his own hand on the last deal and Billy came undone.

"You set up that deck," he announced succinctly and slowly. "I had them tens last time an' you picked 'em up from the discard."

The gambler's face grew a little whiter. Whether or not he had actually cheated no man can say. He moved his hands carefully away from the cards spread before him, shoved back his chair, and with his eyes never leaving Billy's face, spoke two words.

"You lie!"

As he spoke he went into action. It is justifiable to suppose that the gambling man had been in many close places. It is also justifiable to believe that he had come out of them. At least he was there and functioning. It is positive that he had never met a man just like Billy Worth.

With his exclamation the gambler reached for his vest pocket, his fingers closing on the small butt of a derringer therein. Before he got the derringer out and going Billy Worth shoved the table with all his might, came up like a cat and reached back for his chair. The table struck the gambler and one of the strange cowmen. It knocked the breath out of the cowman and the gambler leaned forward under its impetus. Still he was pulling that derringer. But not for long. Billy took a good side arm swing with the chair. The heavy edge of the chair crashed down on the gambling man's head and then and there the lights went out for that gentleman. He fell back, the derringer dropping from relaxing fingers. His eyes rolled back into his head, showing the whites. Blood leaped out of his foreheaed where the chair had cut a gash, and he went back and down. Billy Worth, leaping over the table to complete his job of annihilation, was stopped short as a calf at the end of a rope. The awful pallor of that upturned face, the red blood, already spreading a little on the floor, and those horrible blank eyeballs, checked Billy. He reached back to the overturned table for support.

Hoffman, the fat man, gasped. "You killed him!" and for the moment, that was all.

It was Bob Carp who now took charge of the situation. Bob, grizzled veteran of many a cow camp, spat a thin stream of brown juice toward a corner and eyed Hoffman severely. "He asked for it," announced Mr. Carp. "He had a derringer in his hand when Billy hit him. If it had of been me I'd 'a' shot. Le's see if he's dead."

The gambling man avoided Bob Carp's ideas by letting go a long, stentorian breath, and groaning. One of the strange cowmen, Harris his name was, bent down over

the prone figure. The other cowman, Percy, he called himself, was collecting scattered chips and money from the floor for Billy had upset the bank when he pushed the table.

Harris announced that the gambler was coming to. Billy, looking down at his conquest, saw that the eyes were no longer bloodshot white balls, and felt better.

Percy, with the chips and money in his hands unloaded on the table which Hoffman had righted.

"If he was settin' up the deck," suggested Percy, "le's see how much we each lost an' split the bank."

Hoffman, white faced, was still glowering at Billy Worth. "It's yore damn' temper," said Hoffman. "I thought you'd killed him."

Billy was as white as Hoffman. "I ——" he began.

"You made a good, honest effort," interrupted Bob Carp. "I think Percy's right. We'll split up the bank accordin' to what we lose or win. Then I'm goin' to take this jasper down to Doc Mabrey's an' git him patched up."

Hoffman was still groaning. "The marshal warned me," he whimpered. "He said if there was any more trouble around my place he'd close it up. He said there'd been too much grief here. Damn you, Worth! You come bargin' in here an' raise hell! You git out of here an' stay out!" The fat man's voice rose to a high pitch as he mouthed the last words.

For an instant Billy Worth saw red again. Ten minutes before he would have taken Fat Sam Hoffman apart. His muscles bunched and he moved a half step, then his temper was quenched suddenly. A vision of those rolled-back eyeballs flashed into his mind; Billy's muscles sagged and he stopped short.

Again it was Bob Carp who took the play. "There's no need of the marshal knowin' a thing about this," he suggested. "I ain't goin' to tell, an' you won't, Sam, an' I reckon Billy will keep his mouth shut. I don't know about you gents——" turning to the two cowmen.

Harris shook his head. "Me an' Percy are just passin' through," he announced. "We'll be long gone from here early tomorro'. I reckon we won't speak out of turn."

HOFFMAN breathed a sigh of relief. Then he looked at the gambler. That blank faced man was moving, trying to squirm into a sitting position. "How about him?" wailed Hoffman.

Again Bob Carp spat into the corner. "Him?" he queried. "I figgered that after I'd got Mabrey to patch him up I'd kind of hint about him leavin' town. Mebbe he set up the deck an' mebbe he didn't. It looked like it. One thing sure. He pulled a gun on Billy when Billy wasn't wearin' any. I don't reckon he'll talk a lot."

And so things stood. The cash in the bank was split up according to the losses or gains of each player. The two cowmen and Carp helped the injured gambler out of the rear door of the Hoffman Saloon, Carp explaining in short, laconic sentences just what was going to happen and the gambler listening as well as his aching head would permit him. When they were gone, Billy Worth went down to the O. K. Boarding House and got a room. He paid for it in advance without arguing about the price, a procedure that so startled the proprietor of the O K that he gave Billy a better room than he had meant to.

Upstairs in his room Billy rolled a smoke and undressed. He blew out the lamp, put out his smoke, and turned in. He hoped to go to sleep. Sleep he did, but

three times during the night he awakened, a cold sweat upon him, sitting straight up in bed and the vision of those white eyeballs below a bleeding red gash dancing away from him in the dark. It was a hard night for Billy Worth.

THE next day the little town of Cultus was very quiet. It was Sunday. Billy got up late and ate a listless breakfast. He got a drink at the Exchange Saloon, a place that he never frequented. Then he went to the livery and saw that Buster, his pack horse, and Hobo, his own particular riding stock, were all right. After that he walked down the street where housewives were stoking fires for Sunday dinners. The fall wind whispered peacefully through bare limbed trees. The sky was clear and a cloudless blue. Billy Worth let go a long, sighing breath. Ten short hours ago he had tried to kill a man. Had almost succeeded. Twenty-four hours ago Old Man Jonstone had fired him. Had told him that he had too much temper. He had tried to get three different jobs since and had been refused in each case. He knew that the reason for the refusals was his aptitude in losing his head.

Back at the livery barn were Hobo and Buster. Maybe he had better get them and pull out. Maybe it would be better to seek greener pastures where he was not known. Billy shook his head. That wouldn't do. Pride would not let him run away. He would stay right here in Cultus and whip it, fight it out. One thing sure, he was done with this temper business.

Billy turned, and awkward in his high heels, walked back through the sand toward Cultus's dusty streets.

About three o'clock Billy was sitting in the little lobby of the O K when Tom Alymer came in. Tom was the marshal of Cultus, a little iron hard man, square and fair and fearless. He walked over to where Billy sat and Billy saw at once that someone had talked about the occurrence in Hoffman's saloon. Tom Alymer had his hand under his coat, across his chest. Billy knew that Alymer carried his gun there.

THE marshal went directly to business. "I heard about that fracas in Hoffman's last night, Worth," said the marshal harshly. "I come in to tell you it won't do."

Billy held his seat. He was being blamed for something that was not his fault, he felt. Little dry sparks began to dance in his blue eyes.

Alymer shook his head. "You hold yore horses," he directed. "You been flyin' off the handle any time an' every time you pleased. You get salty with me an' I'll kill you!" That was a direct promise, not a threat. Billy knew it.

"Well?" he asked, his mouth dry.

"I come in to warn you," continued Alymer evenly. "You lost yore temper for the last time in Cultus. Last night, from what Bob Carp tells me, there was some reason for it, but Cultus is a peaceable town. From now on, if you stay here, yo're peaceful too. You been comin' in here an' somebody'ud rub yore hair the wrong way an' you'd take 'em apart. No more, Worth!"

"You tellin' me to leave town?" queried Billy, dryly.

"Use your own judgment," answered Alymer.

The marshal backed off carefully, his eyes on Billy. Billy stayed in his chair. Over behind the dessk Chet Borodeen, who owned and operated the O K, held his breath. Chet expected Billy to come out of that chair like a rock from a catapult. If Billy did, Chet knew that Alymer would shoot. Still Billy held his place. Tom Alymer reached the door and went through. Chet let go the breath he had held. No time like the present. He would strike while the iron was hot. He came around the corner of the desk.

"I got a party comin' in tomorro', Billy," Chet began conversationally. "I'll be

needin' all the rooms I got. If you——"

Chet stopped short before the blue, flaming hell in Billy Worth's eyes. He backed away hastily. "Of course I won't be needin' yore room, Billy," said Chet Borodeen placatingly. "Come on back an' have a drink with me. I got some private stuff ——"

"Shut yore damn' mouth!" grated Billy Worth.

He went upstairs to his room after that, sat down on his bed and stared at the wall. What was he anyhow? A mad dog? They treated him that way. First Jonstone, then Hoffman, then Alymer, and now Chet. They had all acted as if he were a vicious animal. Billy rose from the bed and began to gather up his few small personal possessions. They could all go to hell, every one of them! He was done with Cultus and all its works. He would go away so far that it would take two dollars to send him a post card. He would leave Cultus. He went back and sat down on the bed. It had just occurred to Billy Worth that he could not leave Billy Worth. Maybe they were right. Maybe he was a hydrophobia skunk, rabid with temper.

So Billy Worth stayed in Cultus and tried to get a job. He did not get one. The sixty dollars dwindled and became thirty, then twenty. Shortly they would be gone.

Billy kept his temper. He knew that Alymer was watching him, knew that Hoffman and Borodeen and the rest had their eyes on him. He went about his business. He rode out to the various ranches around the little town and asked for a job. He was met by polite refusal even where he knew that the place was short handed. Bob Carp was staying in town, too. Billy did not ask Bob for a job. He knew the Two Bar. The elite of the cattle country rode Two Bar horses. A straw boss on any other ranch would be just a cowhand on the Two Bar. Not a very good cowhand, either. Billy stayed away from Bob Carp.

ON THE Saturday of the second week in Cultus, Billy went into the Exchange Saloon. He had heard that Wick Copley of the Double Eight was there. Billy intended to ask Wick for a job. The Double Eight was forty miles from Cultus and Wick got in only once in a while. Copley was not in the Exchange but Clark Bent and three riders from the Y Bar were there. So was Old Man Jonstone. Billy did not see the Old Man. Jonstone was back of the bar in a corner, talking with Bob Carp and Tom Alymer. Billy looked the room over, failed to find Copley, and turned to go.

Bent, his face still bruised from Billy's bit, called him back.

"Hey, Worth!"

Billy turned.

Bent had taken several drinks. His flushed face showed it. He spoke in an aside to the Y Bar boys and they all laughed. Billy again started to the door.

A second time Bent called him. "What you runnin' for, Worth?"

Billy stopped short in his tracks. "You want to talk to me, Clark?" he asked evenly.

"Want to give you a job." Bent's words were a little thick. "They tell me that they made a good dog outa you here in Cultus. I could use a good dog."

Billy's face was white. Every muscle was tense. He was ready to jump. If ever a man had a right to lose his temper, now was the time He would walk over and wring Clark Bent's neck. Billy took a step. Bent, apparently unarmed, dropped his hand across his shirt. The bottom button of the shirt was gone, unfastened. As sure as fate Clark Bent had a belly gun under the shirt. Billy hesitated. Then he took another step. He could give Bent the odds of two belly guns and still whip him. Billy's eyes were hot. Over behind the bar Alymer and Carp and Jonstone had risen. Billy did not see them. He stopped at the end of the second step. He had set out to whip his temper. Now was the time to do the job.

Bent misunderstood that hesitancy. He thought that he had Billy bluffed. "Pretty good dog!" he crowed. "I'll put yuh to helpin' the cook, Worth. You'd be a good flunky."

Billy Worth stood still. He did not see Bent; he saw nothing but a red curtain that had dropped in front of his eyes. Blood was pounding in his temples and his muscles trembled. For a long half minute he stood there. Alymer had come from around the corner of the bar and was advancing on soft treading feet. Billy whipped down the red curtain. He fought down the trembling muscles and the pounding temples. Very slowly he turned and forced himself toward the door of the Exchange.

One of the Y Bar boys said, "Yellow, by God!"

Billy checked in his stride and then forced himself on. He went out of the door.

Tom Alymer spoke softly to Clark Bent. "You damn' fool!" said Tom Alymer

gently. "You pore damn' fool! I'll take that belly gun. Billy Worth could have spotted you that an' still killed you. Get out of town—yo're drunk!"

Back in the corner, behind the bar, Old Man Jonstone dropped his hand softly to the table. Upon him Bob Carp turned bleak gray eyes.

"An' you, you old fool," said Bob Carp, "you fired that kid."

Old Man Jonstone flared up. He'd heard the play but had misinterpreted the whole thing. "Yo're damn' right I fired him," rasped Old Man Jonstone. "I was right too! He's a bully an' they called his bluff around here. He's a gutless wonder!"

Bob Carp grunted contemptuously. He turned his broad back on Old Man Jonstone and walked out of the Exchange. As he passed Tom Alymer he grinned. Alymer, holding the belly gun that Bent had handed over, grinned back at Carp. Then the marshal carried the gun back and dumped it on the table in front of Jonstone.

"Tell Bent not to carry that in town no more," he said shortly.

BILLY WORTH, having left the Exchange, went down to his room. He got his key and climbed the stairs and opened his door. Then, sitting on his bed, he stared at the blank wall. Billy's face was white. He was trembling and his eyes were just slits. Steps thumped on the stair and Billy gathered himself. He'd kept his temper once. Could he do it again? He wondered.

The door of Billy's room squealed open. Bob Carp came in, stood just inside the door. Bob raised a hand and stroked the grizzled, close cropped mustache that was his chief personal adornment. Bob Carp's voice was rasping.

"I got a string of horses out at the Bogville camp," he said. "They're ready to start. I want a man out there to ride the fence an' the bog. How soon can you go?"

Billy looked at Carp with blank, uncomprehending eyes. "Me?" he asked, his voice small.

"You," agreed Carp.

"But that's a Two Bar camp," expostulated Billy Worth. "I——"

"Pay you forty," grunted Bob Carp. "Git yore traps together."

Holding down a line camp by himself is a good job for a man with a temper. Billy found that out. There was nothing around the Bogville camp for Billy to get mad at except a string of horses and himself. Billy prided himself on the fact that

he never lost his temper with a horse. There wasn't any use losing his temper at his own fool stunts.

Anyhow he'd got over the first big hump back there in town. He'd kept his temper when by all rights he should have flown off the handle. That had been a real chore. Accomplishing it Billy found that he had accomplished something else. He couldn't exactly place the thing he'd done but he knew he'd done something. Bob Carp, making the rounds of his camps, surveyed Billy shrewdly. There was a change in Billy Worth and Bob Carp could see it. Bob was a pretty wise old timer. He'd been through the mill. He saw that a hot headed kid had changed into a man. When he left the Bogville camp he grinned to himself. It had been worth the trouble. He had been right when he'd told Tom Alymer about the trouble with the gambler, and plotted with Tom. Tom had gone down and put the bee on Billy and when Clark Bent had popped off Billy had stood the gaff. Stood it too well maybe. Bob Carp lost his grin. He wondered. Maybe

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Things began to happen at the Bogville camp. The camp tender didn't get in with supplies. Billy made out on jerky and saleratus biscuits. The tobacco ration was missing on a trip. Billy scraped his pockets and rode it through. A Two Bar puncher, noted for his edged tongue, hit the Bogville camp and stayed a week. When he reported to Bob Carp he was disgusted.

"Just as mild as milk," said the Two Bar man. "I couldn't git a rise outa him."

Bob began to wonder if he'd spoiled his colt. A horse that has his spirit broken isn't worth a damn. Bob knew that. He wondered about Billy Worth.

But Bob Carp didn't wonder for long. Things happened which took his mind from the young fellow with the blue eyes and the black hair and the temper. The Two Bar moved three thousand head of stock, she stuff and yearlings, down into the south end of their country, where Bob was riding boss. Winter, which had been playing a cat and mouse game with the country around Cultus, closed in with a vicious snap. Rustlers began to operate. Bob Carp didn't have much time to spend gentling a rider.

IT WASN'T a little rustling. Not a business of some hungry nester taking a calf for beef, or a man with a sticky rope dabbing it on a few head. Nothing like that. Fifty head of good Two Bar yearlings disappeared at one crack, disappeared as cleanly as though they'd grown wings and flown away. Fifty head!

Then over on the Double Eight Wick Copley rode out one morning to find that some thirty prime heifers had been scooped up. Sometime during the snowstorm of the night before they had been taken from their pasture and driven away, plumb clear away. Wick raised his voice in a yell for help.

On top of that the Y Bar lost some cattle. Lost them just as Wick had lost them, just as the Two Bar had lost those yearlings. Old Man Jonstone read the doxology to his riders.

The Stock Association apprized of happenings, sent men into Cultus. The inspectors came, looked things over, rode around to the ranches and went back to town. That night the Two Bar lost thirty head more during a snow.

Bob Carp rode days and nights too. The Two Bar boys carried guns, so did the riders from the Double Eight, the Y Bar, the Split Circle and all the rest of the ranches around Cultus. Strangers were looked upon with cold suspicion. Improvident punchers riding the grubline were fed once and sent on their way. Things tightened up, got mighty narrow in the Cultus country.

Billy Worth was informed of these happenings by Bob Carp. Old Bob hit the Bogville camp one night just as Billy, his riding done for the day, was getting in his firewood. The riding boss threw his

horse into the corral and carried a bucket of water from the spring while Billy got the fire going in the long, sheet iron stove. When the fire roared Billy cut steaks from a quarter of beef that was in the meat safe, opened a can of corn and got the biscuits going. Bob watched the proceedings. He waited until they had eaten and finished with the dishes before he broke his tidings.

"Billy," said Bob Carp, "yo're a Two Bar hand now."

Billy knew it. He nodded.

"The Two Bar is losin' stock," continued Carp. He went on then and told the whole story. Told about the yearlings that the Two Bar had lost, about the heifers that had disappeared from the Double Eight, about the stock that had been stolen from Old Man Jonstone. He told the whole yarn and he finished with this:

"Yo're right smack dab in the middle, Billy. Them yearlings was taken not ten miles from here. Jonstone lost his steers from his north pasture, right against the fence you ride every day. The Double Eight's heifers was on their west end, not fo'teen miles from here. What do you think about it, Billy?"

Billy Worth scratched his head. He didn't know what to think. Finally he grinned at Carp. "I think it's hell," he suggested. "It sure looks like they was usin' this place for headquarters, don't it?"

Carp grunted. "That's what some of 'em say," he answered. "You know, Billy, you had cause to be sore at all of them fellows some time or other. Some of 'em——"

Bob checked and watched Billy's eyes. He expected to see the danger signal, little, dry, dancing sparks. Instead Billy just looked interested. "Right around here," said Billy Worth, almost to himself. "Ain't that a humdinger?"

Carp rode on the next morning. He left instructions for Billy to quit riding bog and devote his whole attention to the fence. He also left a supply of thirty-thirty shells for Billy's rifle and ordered Billy to pack the gun all the time. He was disappointed when Billy told him that he had no hand gun. When Bob was gone Billy sat down on his mussed bedding, scratched his head and probably for the first time in his life, indulged in some really serious thought. For a long while he sat there, then he rose, put on his sheepskin and cap and went out.

HE SADDLED a horse in the corral and went to the cabin and got the thirty-thirty and put it in its scabbard on the saddle. Then he found a long handled shovel, tied that also to the saddle and, mounting, rode directly away from the fence that Bob Carp had ordered him to ride.

The Bogville camp got its name from the fact that it was really situated by a bog. Some freak of nature had caused a bunch of springs, some cold, some hot, to congregate in a low piece of bottom land. The water from the springs didn't drain away as rapidly as it rose. Instead a lot of it remained to cover some twenty sections of land, making a big marsh. The Two Bar bog it was called. Willows grew through the bog. Tall salt grass rimmed its edges. It was a dangerous, treacherous place. No rider had ever gone clear through for there was no use. Cattle didn't use the bog. Most of the springs were alkali. The water stank and oozed from between clumps of sod along the edge. There was no trail in and no trail out. The Two Bar kept a rider at the Bogville camp to ride the edges of the marsh and pull out any cattle that were foolish or careless enough to be trapped in the bottomless ooze at the edge of the swamp. The Y Bar used a man for the same purpose but as most of the swamp was behind the Two Bar fence the Y Bar didn't bother much.

Toting his shovel and the thirty-thirty Billy Worth rode along the edge of the bog. Billy had ideas.

It seemed as though they wouldn't pan out. He dismounted at several likely places and tried to get into the swamp. The

ground oozed away from under him and water sucked at his boots. He broke through thin glare ice that the wind had swept clear of snow, and found the sticky, sucking mud below. He began to think that his ideas were no good.

Still they had to be good as far as he could reason, and he kept on. These cattle had been stolen during storms. Storms covered tracks. There hadn't been any stolen cattle reported from the central markets. The Stock Association saw to that. The answer was that the rustled stock was still in the country. The men from whom those cattle had been stolen knew the country, none better. They had searched all the likely places, that was certain. That left only the unlikely places and, if ever there was an unlikely place, the Two Bar Bog was it. Billy rode along.

Away down at the far end of the swamp, six or seven miles from the Bogville camp,

Billy followed a spur of higher ground that led in toward the marsh. He crossed a little trickle of water that ran because it was warm. The water seemed out of place to him for it ran across the higher ground.

Where the spur of land dipped into the bog Billy dismounted. With his shovel he prodded into the mud. Surprisingly he hit bottom within eight or nine inches. Hating to do it, for he knew what the mud would do to his boots, Billy went ahead, prodding before him with the shovel handle. He went on and on, through willows and over tufted swamp, and presently he came to the place where a warm spring flowed.

It was plain as the nose on his face now. He could see where men had worked with shovels, damming the spring, turning its course so that it flowed out of the swamp and made the little trickle of water that crossed the low ridge. Billy was walking on frozen footing. In the churned mud and snow that lay before him he could see where cattle had gone in. Very carefully Billy Worth backed away and, carrying his shovel, returned to his horse. He'd found where the cattle were going.

BILLY rode back to the Bogville camp revolving his discovery in his mind. The cattle were in the Two Bar swamp, the question now was who had put them there and what they intended doing with the rustled stock. Billy couldn't figure those angles. He quit worrying about them. If the men who were taking the cattle could be found they doubtless would explain what they intended doing with the cattle. Billy smiled grimly at the idea. No doubt but that the rustling gentry had a scheme all worked out. They were slick enough to use the swamp; they would be slick enough to get their cows out. The thing was, how to catch them.

Back at the Bogville camp, Billy unsaddled, put the shovel away and went to the house. He puzzled around the camp for a couple of hours. Then he got a bright idea and chuckled over it. He found a piece of pencil, tore some brown paper from a package of salt pork and sat down to do a piece of writing. When he had finished he read his missive, folded it and put it in his cap. Then he went out, saddled a fresh horse and rode almost all of the fence he was supposed to cover.

Lon Whitier, the camp tender, showed up with his wagon the next morning. Billy had stayed in to welcome him. Lon unloaded various supplies for Billy, gave him the news and took Billy's brown paper letter, promising faithfully to deliver it to

Bob Carp. They ate dinner together and then Lon pulled out, leaving Billy well satisfied with himself. Now all that he had to do, thought Billy Worth, was to attend to his riding and wait for a storm.

The storm failed to come. Winter was back at the old cat and mouse game. Billy, never too patient, began to fret. He rode his fence and worked his young horses, and watched the sky. Finally the day came. Clouds hung low over Sixty-Six mountain and the rim. The wind blew in fretful puffs, angry of restraint. Billy penned a good bunch of horses. He singled out Hobo, his own big brown gelding and roped the horse. He saddled and put the thirty-thirty in the scabbard and tied the shovel on the saddle. Then he waited.

He waited until snow began to drop in big, furry flakes. He waited until he could wait no longer and then he took his chance. He rode Hobo down along the edge of the swamp, bucking the snow flurries and watchful and alert. He came to the dry spit of land that edged out into the swamp. There he hid Hobo in a willow thicket and, prodding with his shovel, worked in just as he had before.

When he reached the warm spring he saw horse tracks. At least he thought they were horse tracks, he couldn't tell in the mud, but they were fresh anyhow. With his long handled shovel he set to work, undoing the work that other men had wrought about the spring. He threw mud and muck, he pried out rocks that must have been carried in one at a time, he cut willows that had been shoved into the mud. When he finished Billy was a sweating, muddy mess but the seep from the spring was working back into the bog, trickling in and in and melting the frozen mud as it went. Billy had done all that he planned. He splashed his way out of the bog, cleaned what mud he could from his boots, and found Hobo.

Back at the Bogville cabin Billy cleaned up a little and then set about cooking supper for a bunch of men. He cooked enough for six at least, biscuits and steak and potatoes and coffee. When the meal was on he looked over the thirty-thirty, placing it handily by the door. He cleaned and lit his lantern, hanging it outside. Then he waited.

It was full dark now and still snowing. Billy thought that he should have company pretty soon. Bob Carp and some Two Bar riders ought to be showing up. Billy was confident that his letter would bring results.

Still Bob failed to arrive. Billy ate a bite of steak and a couple of biscuits. He drank a cup of coffee. It was time for Bob to get there. He was drinking his second cup of coffee when a horse came in. Billy put down his cup and opened the door. Snow fell in a mask before the cabin, glistening in the yellow light of the lantern.

Billy yelled, "It's about time!" thinking that Bob had arrived.

A MAN loomed up in the snow, stamping to the cabin and leading a horse. Billy stepped away from the door, still thinking that Bob had come.

The man came into the cabin, stamping the snow from his boots and shaking it from his coat. Billy saw that it was Old Man Jonstone. He was surprised, Billy was. His face showed it.

"Why—" he began, hesitantly—"Mister Jonstone—I wasn't lookin' for you. I ——"

Jonstone looked around the cabin. He could see the places at the table, set for a bunch of men. He could see the meal set on the back of the stove. It looked like just one thing and Old Man Jonstone jumped to conclusions.

"You damn' rustler!" he snapped at Billy Worth and dragged out a long barreled forty-four Colt from inside his coat. Billy, completely surprised, took two backward steps and sat down on his bunk.

"Waitin' for yore pardners to come in, huh?" snarled Old Man Jonstone, mean and ugly. "Didn't have guts enough to go out an' buck the storm, huh? Well—

they'll be here. I was right on their tails till I hit the fence."

Billy got it then. The Old Man had been out working cattle in the storm and he'd jumped a bunch rustling some of his cows. He'd followed them and hit the Bogville camp. The rustlers were getting careless, coming in so close. Billy opened his mouth to try to tell Jonstone what it was all about but the Old Man wasn't listening that evening.

"Shut up, damn you!" he snarled. "I'll be right here to meet 'em when they git in!"

The cocked Colt in the Old Man's hand was ugly. Its snout was pointed squarely at Billy's middle. The Old Man backed over to the door and possessed himself of the carbine. Again, faint through the storm Billy heard horses. He hoped that this was Bob Carp and the Two Bar hands, come in answer to his letter. Bob could call off this fiery-eyed old hellion. For the first time in his life Billy Worth was afraid of a man. Old Man Jonstone had completely lost his temper.

The horses stopped outside, right by the door. Old Man Jonstone, Colt cocked and ready, thirty-thirty by his side, backed over along the wall of the cabin and stopped by the stove. "You yell an' I'll bust yuh wide open," he warned Billy.

Billy didn't know what to do. If Bob Carp walked in through the door the Old Man was apt to let him have it without waiting to see who it was. Billy opened his mouth to warn Bob. The door slammed open and Clark Bent, gun out, came through. Old Man Jonstone lowered his weapon when he saw his foreman.

Behind Bent was the gray-faced gambler that Billy had taken to town in Cultus, and behind the gambler were the two cowmen who had been present on that memorable night, Percy and Harris. They all had guns in their hands and mud on their boots and Billy knew that he had caught his rustlers. He didn't see though, what he was going to do with them.

Bent failed to see Old Man Jonstone at first. His eyes were fixed on Billy Worth. "There's the dirty son that fixed the trail!" Bent yelled, and his gun came up, hammer back.

Old Man Jonstone gasped, "Clark!"

Clark Bent stopped, his gun in mid air. He was as surprised as Billy and the Old Man. In fact everybody in the Bogville cabin was surprised.

The gambler recovered first. He shoved himself past Bent and threw down on Jonstone. He yelled, "Drop it!" Old Man Jonstone let go his hold on the cocked Colt. It bounced down on the floor but did not go off. Percy and Harris had come into the cabin and Percy closed the door.

OLD MAN JONSTONE recovered a little. "What does this mean, Clark?" he demanded. "Who are these men? What you doin' here?"

The gambler snarled, "Shut up, you old fool!"

Bent, with his gun still on Billy Worth, asked a question. "My gosh! What'll we do now?"

The gambler was thinking fast. "Let 'em have it!" he snapped. "We can put a gun in the kid's hand an' it'll look like he killed the Old Man an' the Old Man killed him. Go ahead, you fool!"

"But——" began Bent.

"Hell!" snarled the gambler.

Billy Worth lost his temper. This cold-blooded murder business was just a little too much to ask a man to stand. Billy was on his bunk, close beside the table. The lamp was on the table together with a bunch of eating tools and half a dozen heavy crockery plates. Billy kicked the table over, ducking as he moved, and grabbing for a plate. The lamp slid off the table with all the rest of the things that were there. It crashed on the floor and went out. A gun roared and a slug smacked into the cottonwood logs of the cabin right where Billy's head had been. That would be the gambler. Billy threw

the plate with all his strength, got his feet under him and leaped.

He was mad all the way through, madder than he had ever been in his life, but the red curtain that usually covered his eyes, and the pounding that usually filled his head were missing. Indeed Billy, mad as he was, was thinking fast and clear and straight.

Every man in that cabin was an enemy. Maybe Old Man Jonstone didn't come in the enemy category exactly but he had butted in and he could just take the consequences. Billy's hard head hit a soft place. A man said "Woooof," as the breath went out of him, and stumbled back. Billy was on top of the man. He grabbed with his left hand and found a throat and then slugged with his right. The third time he swung his hand hit the wall, taking all the skin from the knuckles. Billy let go his left hand hold, rolled, got half way up and kicked viciously.

A gun went off somewhere above his head and a man shrieked. Billy got clear up.

Over across the cabin a spirited fight was in progress. Billy didn't know who

was in the battle. He didn't care. He was mad. He waded in, both fists swinging. He did some damage but hurt his hand when he hit the wall again. Reeling back from a blow that had centered on his nose he stopped against his saddle. It hung from a peg on the wall. Billy pulled down the saddle and heaved it with both hands. He heard a man go down. The bridle was on a peg right next to the saddle. Billy got it. He held the reins in his hand and swung the bit. The reins wrapped around something. Billy let them go and dived in. He collided with a man and found a gun against him. The man was panting, trying to say something. He didn't dare shoot for fear of hitting one of his own men. Billy wasn't hampered. He brought up his fist with all of his one hundred and sixty pounds behind it. His feet were flat on the floor and his body rigid when he struck. The gun went away from his middle and Billy lurched forward, his arms out, searching for more worlds to conquer.

The door of the cabin banged open. There was light in the room. Old Bob Carp, lantern in one hand, gun in the other, was inside the door. Behind Bob were five Two Bar punchers, loaded and ready for bear.

Bob Carp said, "My Gawd! What happened here?"

Billy blinked and looked around with watering eyes. His nose hurt like the devil. Old Man Jonstone, his face purple and his eyes bulged out, sat almost in the middle of the floor. He was trying to untangle Billy's bridle reins from around his neck. There were a pair of feet protruding from under Billy's bunk. The feet shifted and the bunk bucked convulsively. Clark Bent was behind the door. His eyes were rolled back and he was breathing stertorously. There was a lump on his jaw, already swelling. The gambler lay, half propped against the wall. In the first mad flurry of the fight some excited individual had let go with a gun. The gambler had taken the slug just under the wishbone. He was dead. As Billy completed his survey Percy, the whilom cattle buyer, crawled out from under the table. He was very white, was Percy, and very, very sick, which fact he proceeded at once to prove.

Bob Carp, puzzlement written large on his face, repeated his demand. He looked straight at Billy Worth. "What happened, Billy?" questioned Bob Carp sternly.

Billy gulped. He looked his foreman in

the eyes and gulped again. "I lost my temper, I guess," confessed Billy Worth.

Bob Carp's eyes lost their stern look. One hand, his left, went up to caress his grizzled mustache. The long narrow wrinkles at the corners of his eyes contracted suddenly and, from beneath the mustache came a mighty guffaw of laughter.

Down on the floor Old Man Jonstone, who had freed himself from the bridle reins and partially recovered his breath, wasted some of it. Old Man Jonstone looked at Billy Worth and then at the wreck of what had once been the neat Bogville cabin.

"My Lawd!" exclaimed Old Man Jonstone.

THE Two Bar men and Bob Carp sorted things out in the cabin. They helped Old Man Jonstone up from the floor and they carried the dead gambler outside. They tied Clark Bent and Harris and Percy with strong unyielding knots and they heard the whole story. Bob Carp pried it out of Billy and Bent and the two supposed cattle buyers.

It was Bent who had discovered the way into the Two Bar bog and, searching, had found that inside the swamp there was higher ground and good grass and water. He had joined with Percy and Harris. The gambler knew Harris and had declared himself in. They had dammed the warm spring so that the mud would freeze and, when it had frozen, had proceeded to run off cattle. They felt absolutely secure.

To get the cattle out they had planned to have Harris and Percy actually buy cattle from every rustled brand. Then, by forging the bills of sale, bringing the cattle out of the swamp at night, and loading at more distant points, they had thought that they could ship in peace. It had been a good plan, but Billy had spoiled it.

Coming in with a drive of Y Bar cows that night they had found the way bogged. Billy's work with the shovel had borne fruit. The water from the hot spring had thawed the mud. Their trail was gone. They were all done. They would plead guilty. The cattle were in the swamp with the exception of this last drive. Some of this drive were bogged, some were not. They had come back to settle with Billy Worth when they found the trail closed and they had run into trouble. The fight was completely gone from the three.

Old Man Jonstone told his side of the story. He had jumped a bunch of men running off some of his stock. He'd followed them, lost them in the storm, hit the Bogville cabin and, fooled by what he had seen there jumped Billy's frame. The Old Man half apologized to Billy. He wasn't thinking any too clearly yet.

When the inquisition was done Bob Carp turned to Billy. Carp's face was stern but there was still a suspicious twinkle in his eyes. "Seems to me like you taken an awful lot on yorese'f young fello'," he observed accusingly.

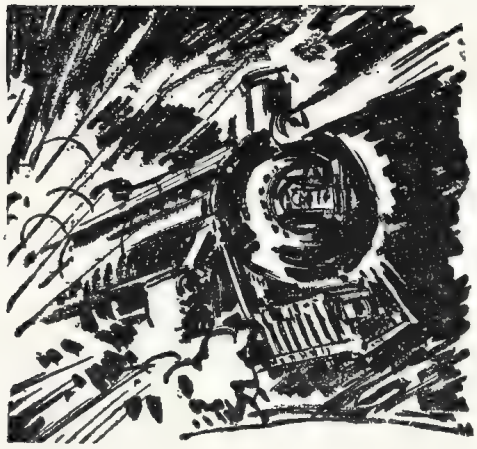
Billy looked abashed.

"That fool Lon never give me yore letter till tonight," continued Carp. "You said to come as soon as it stormed. We lit right out."

Billy looked up. That explained the delay. Bob Carp's eyes were still twinkling. He looked around the wrecked cabin, partially righted now. He looked back at Billy. Suddenly he chuckled.

"Lost yore temper, did yuh?" chortled Bob Carp. "Just natchully got mad, I reckon." His deep mirth boomed in the cabin. "Don't yuh," concluded Bob Carp, "ever get mad at me, young fella. Not while yo're on the Two Bar payroll."

Billy Worth, his nose aching and his knuckles skinned, made solemn answer. "I won't, Mister Carp," said Billy seriously. "I won't get mad. I've learned to keep my temper, I have."



Main Line Stuff

By WILLIAM EDWARD HAYES

Author of "One Minute After Midnight," "Hell For Ransom," and Other Stories of the Railroaders

I

JOHNNY WESTCOTT came down on the rocky bend with his whistle wide open and his cab careening with the pitch of the long curve. He came down bouncing on his worn leather cushion. There was a wide, contented grin on his freckled face. There was a soft song in his throat, a tuneful, swelling song. He looked ahead with the curving wall of rock on his right. The rocks intensified the slam of driving tire on rail joint, the sluff of drifting pistons. He couldn't see anything but the gray-brown granite because the curve was to his right as he rolled 'em eastward. The river was on his left, wide and shallow, and muddy. The main line curved with the river, and the rock wall curved with the main line.

Johnny couldn't see anything, but he knew everything was all right. There was a semaphore with its arm pointing skyward. It was on the outside of the curve so that both engineer and fireman could see it for some little distance. They called it the distant signal because it told you the position of the home signal over the depot at Aberdeen just around the bend.

The fireman called across the cab, "Clear on the bend." He called the position of that semaphore.

Johnny saw it and called back, "Clear!"

He went on singing and watching, and smiling that happy smile. He reckoned his speed at twenty miles which was what the time table instructions called for on that bend. A swift, blue eye swept gauges and gadgets briefly. Everything was in perfect harmony. Everything was gloriously swell.

He shelled off his grimy gloves and took a package from the floor ahead of his seat. He hoisted it to his lap, felt over the bundlesome wrappings. He was making sure

Johnny Westcott Was the Sort that Hung on to Prove that He Was Really Main Line Stuff

it would stand the bump it was to receive presently. It would hit the Aberdeen platform with a bang, and probably roll a few feet. It had to be padded well, otherwise it wouldn't be much of a fit gift for a girl. Funny way to have to give a girl a token of your esteem. Who else but a main line railroader had to throw off his presents? Anybody else could walk up on a front porch in the cool of the evening, and, clad in his Sunday clothes, carry his box of candy neatly under his arm.

Johnny hoped the cotton waste beneath the several layers of newspaper would protect the candy. He didn't like to think of Gail Trevor fishing out a scrambled mess of bon-bons with a generous mixture of those little paper wrappers they set the pieces in. Especially since, at the moment, he was not exactly in good standing with the deep-eyed young lady who pounded the brass at Aberdeen.

HE WAS thankful Gail worked for the railroad. Being the Aberdeen telegrapher from four until midnight daily gave him a chance to see her more often because he passed Aberdeen one way or another every day or so. Sometimes he stopped. Sometimes they had a chance for a word or two. The words, lately, hadn't been exactly the kind Johnny craved most to hear, but then that was Johnny's fault. He couldn't expect a lady to be serious about him when he wasn't serious about himself.

Gail had said that. In fact she had used almost those very words. She had put it something like this: "Now you look here, Johnny. I don't know whether it's just that you haven't got any better sense, or whether you're careless. Anyhow you keep in hot water all the time by doing one foolish thing or another. For a locomotive engineer you can get yourself involved in more silly things!"

Johnny didn't call them silly, nor was he willing to accept all blame. There was the evening, for instance, he was setting a car of sheep out of his train in the Clayburne yards. It was very dark and threatening a storm. He watched his brakeman's lantern, far down on the lead track. The lantern's circles told him to come on back. He shoved the train on back. The lantern suddenly signalled wildly for him to stop. He had hold of thirty cars and he stopped as quickly as he could. In fact he stopped with an emergency bang. He saw a lot of lanterns gathering and suspected something awful. He dropped from his engine and went to investigate. He found that the car of sheep had sideswiped the general superintendent's business car, ripping off the stock car's side door, and crushing the general super's brass rail. The super's car was full of bleating sheep and a couple of aggravated rams. The general superintendent was trying to climb up the wall.

Johnny's fault? What chance has an engineer against the combined evidence of two brakemen, three switchmen and a conductor? They said they broke their arms signalling Johnny to stop and when Johnny finally woke up enough to answer the signal it was all over but the bleating.

They gave Johnny two weeks off without pay to think over his sins. In fact, Trainmaster Guy Coleman, who prosecuted the case against him, read a long list of similar accidents to the investigating board with, what seemed to Johnny, a certain fiendish relish. And the superintendent, on Mr. Coleman's recommendations, said very gruffly, "All right, Johnny. One more mess and——"

Whenever the super finished a sentence like that you had to look out.

So for a whole long month now, Johnny Westcott had been doubly careful about every single thing concerned with his job. Some comedians in train service yelled "Baaaa! Baaaaa!" at him every time he passed them, but he was a good natured guy. He let that pass.

And he didn't blame Gail. He could see how these things might look like something very careless and silly to somebody on the outside. Perhaps he was at fault a lot in not being more alert, and in trust-

ing others too much. He had tried to think he might be jinxed, because he certainly knew an engine like nobody else on the railroad. He was the kind of runner the mechanical officers swear by, because he handled the big jacks with the least amount of repairs. He was a whiz at getting the maximum efficiency with the least amount of fuel.

JOHNNY looked at his watch as the end of the long curve neared. It was 4:27. The westering sun sprawled the shadow of the engine and the drifting smoke on a grotesque slant against the cliff. The rattle and clank dinned against his ear drums. The sluff-sluff of the pistons came as a sibilant overtone. Twenty miles. That was his speed. That's what the book called for. That's how alert he was. He was going to have to convince Gail with a spotless record from now on. Down to every little detail. He must not overlook his hand. Guy Coleman would be watching for that.

The grin died. Guy Coleman was watching for a great deal. He was watching especially over Miss Gail Trevor. Johnny swallowed at the thought. He chided himself that it was Gail's business. He was not engaged to her. He had a nerve!

He reached for his whistle again and blasted out jubilantly a call that was not in the book of rules. It was his private salute to Gail. The wrapped candy box was still in his lap. He gave the ballast a quick glance. Twenty miles. He could tell by the ballast blur. His grin returned, wide and freckled and honestly bright. The end of the curve—

"Red eye!" The fireman shouted the warning. "All red, Johnny!"

Johnny saw then, in a brief flash, the home signal arm above the depot a thousand feet away. The arm was horizontal, in the stop position. He mumbled to himself, "Something must've gone wrong and she had to change it on me." A slow frown had replaced the smile, and he reached for his air valve calmly.

The grade was descending, and Johnny had three thousand tons of dead freight on his tail. There was no need for a hurried braking. A simple train line reduction of fifteen to twenty pounds would do it. He was grateful he was under control. If he'd come off that curve like most of the boys, at thirty or thirty-five, he'd have slid a long way by.

Johnny touched the air expertly. He watched the pressure hand on the air gauge dial. There was a blare of exhaust by his knee where the reduction whistled from the port. He looked along the platform and didn't see Gail. Probably copying a train order at the last minute.

He was conscious of the rumble of the brakes on the wheels, the sure arrest of his momentum. In another two hundred feet his pilot would be at rest beneath Gail's semaphore.

HIS pilot came to rest much sooner. It came with appalling swiftness just as he touched his brass brake handle for the final five-pound draw. He heard his fireman's smothered yell as he was hurled against the forward casing of his window and twisted out of his seat.

Johnny swallowed and blinked and tried to read his air gauge. He read it and a coldness traveled up his spine. The compressors were racing. Something had happened to throw the brakes into emergency. There was only one answer. A defective brake had kicked back at normal reduction and perhaps had parted the train. He swung his valve to release. Then he heard Guy Coleman bawling. He looked out and saw Coleman racing out of the telegraph office with his thin lips moving in his wide, shallow face.

Coleman was up with him when Johnny dropped to the ground. Gail was there behind the train master. Johnny tried to meet her eyes and didn't like what he saw. Coleman was speaking in his quick, crisp tones.

"Not under control, eh?" Coleman was

saying. "You've messed things up properly this time, Westcott."

Johnny moved his lips, his eyes flaming. "I was under——"

"What's that you got there?" Coleman demanded.

And Johnny went cold in the middle when he saw that he held the padded box. He looked at it dumbly, incredulously. He remembered he'd had it in his lap. He

must have just hung onto it when he got off. He tried to put it behind him, drop it, throw it away. But Coleman grabbed at it.

Johnny said, "Don't. It's for—Miss—for Gail."

A murderous bellowing caused him to turn. The conductor was coming along the train shouting and waving his arms. He had no hat and his clothes were torn. He was apoplectic with rage.

"Wrecker!" The shouts grew distinct. "Damn caboose sittin' in the river——"

Gail turned away. Johnny met Coleman's glance. He leaned weakly against the gangway steps.

II

THE super was a very thin gentleman named Banks. He wore a long, sour face and spoke sparingly. He made a few words go a long way. No bark at all but a bite that went deep. That's how all the men felt about him. He sat and looked through you and let you and Coleman do the talking.

Coleman sat beside Mr. Banks. He and Mr. Banks were on one side of the table. Johnny and his conductor and the other members of the crew were on the other side.

Coleman said, with a prim smile, "Now, Stevens, if you'll tell us exactly what happened——"

The conductor wouldn't look at Johnny. He faced Coleman.

"It's like I tol' you yesterday at the scene of the accident," Conductor Stevens said. "There ain't much I can tell. We was on the bend above Aberdeen, an' I was a-settin' at my table, doin' my clerical work when the brakes went on with a bang. I got knocked outta my seat, an' was slidin' on the floor towards the front door when the stove pipe, it come down on me, an' then it seemed like everything that wasn't nailed down was all over me. When I could get up, I staggered to the door an' looked out an' damn near died."

"You looked out," Mr. Coleman prompted quietly. He was drumming softly with his finger tips on the table.

"My feet was gettin' wet," the conductor went on after a series of gulps. "I looked out an' I seen water. I looked down an' I was standin' in water. The caboose was in the river, an' the two hind cars was twisted off, an' all over the scenery. It's just one of them things. Musta just cat-hopped the rails an' rolled down the bank standin' up. Musta done that while I was tryin' to get out from under the furnishin's."

Johnny reddened as the skipper closed his wide mouth and gulped again.

"How fast were you traveling on that curve?" Coleman asked.

"I can't exactly say," the skipper returned. "I was at my desk, like I said."

"Would you say thirty—thirty-five miles?" Coleman asked. "Say something like that?"

"I can't say that," the skipper insisted. He shot a side glance at Johnny.

Johnny knew the skipper wouldn't let himself in for anything. That's why he wouldn't talk about speed.

Coleman cleared his throat.

"Well, you've got it, Mr. Banks," Coleman said. He elevated his shoulders slightly. "You've heard all the evidence. Engineman Westcott claims he was under control. He passed the distant signal which was clear. His fireman saw it also. That's correct.

"I was in the telegraph office at Aberdeen. I knew these enginemen were in the habit of coming off that curve at better than thirty. I was there to find out. I knew Westcott would be as likely as any to violate the restriction of twenty an hour. I gave him clear on the distant signal and then set the home signal against him to see what he'd do.

"He came off that curve too fast to do much of anything but big hole his engine —rap the emergency braking to his train. You know, from the evidence, what happened. If Westcott had been under control——"

"I came off that bend at twenty," Johnny blurted. He knew he was facing a last ditch fight. He knew the deck was all against him. "I've tried to tell you there must've been a defective brake on the second car ahead of the caboose to cut up that way. My fireman can tell you——"

"We've heard your story," Mr. Banks cut in icily. He silenced Johnny with his stabbing glance. He nodded to Coleman to proceed.

"If Westcott had been under control," Coleman proceeded, "he could have stopped easily. You know the distance he had. And then, after all the damage he caused, he had the audacity to climb down off that engine with a box of candy in the most grotesque wrappings you can imagine—a box of candy for the young woman employed on the Aberdeen second trick telegraph job.

"That's all, Mr. Banks. You're familiar with Westcott's record. My feeling is, of course, that a man who would put a caboose and its occupants into the river, and then calmly slide out of his cab with a box of candy, certainly isn't responsible enough to be trusted with main line locomotives. Of course, any leniency you might wish to show——"

"Indefinitely suspended from duty," Mr. Banks said with frost on each word. His thin lips compressed. He rapped the table with his bony knuckles.

Johnny gazed at the division boss incredulously.

"But, Mr. Banks!" His voice cracked as he sought to protest. "I'm asking a fair break. I'm trying to appeal——"

"What'd I tell you when you were up here on that sheep accident?" Mr. Banks broke in briskly.

Johnny gulped. He saw Coleman's sneering sort of smile. He had a great desire to punch Mr. Coleman in the jaw. He felt the red flush on his cheeks, and his throat was stopped up. He couldn't speak further.

But Mr. Banks could. He said, "I told you if you ever came up here again on anything like that, I'd put you where you belong. I'm doing it. Out of service."

Chairs scraped on the floor. Everybody was getting up. Johnny got up. The chairman of the engineers' grievance committee cleared his throat. He had been sitting by quietly.

"We'll appeal to the general manager," the chairman said.

"Nobody stopping you," Mr. Banks hurled. "That's your privilege."

"Come on, Johnny."

Down on the platform Johnny stood in a blank stupor. He couldn't understand it. He looked across the cluttered yards. He heard a westbound man on the lead whistle imperiously for the main line gate.

The chairman said, "Don't let it get you down, Johnny. It was plain dirty, the way Coleman laid for you." He dropped a heavy hand on Johnny's arm. "Don't let it worry you. We'll get you back."

III

THE committee got Johnny back but not until three months had passed. There was a string tied to his return. He

could run an engine, the general manager said, but not beyond yard limits. In other words they disqualified him for the main line, and he had to bid in a switching goat.

He came into possession of a leaky kettle on the graveyard trick at Clayburne, the home terminal. He spent eight hours every night, from eleven to seven A. M., pushing it up and down, in and out of switches. The wide, freckled grin which had been so much a part of the main line scenery for some fifteen years, was painfully absent. The switchmen who, at first, thought to get a rise out of him by calling him, "Baaa! Baaa!" gave it up because Johnny merely looked at them with his eyes fixed in a sort of unseeing focus.

Johnny saw nothing of Gail Trevor. He made no effort to see her. He couldn't erase from his thought the look on her face that afternoon when he had stood there by his engine with that bizarre package while a supervising official ripped into it and a conductor was yelling about being in the river with his caboose. Those are things you just never can explain away. He made no inquiries concerning her. A switchman volunteered the information that he had seen Miss Trevor and Mr. Coleman going to a picture show one afternoon when Gail, apparently, had taken the day off and had come down from Aberdeen. That hadn't helped Johnny's feelings, either. He prayed some day that Guy Coleman would be delivered into his hands. He even thought of ways and means of making Coleman look cheap in Gail's eyes, and spent long moments picturing vividly this torture and that by which he could make Coleman sweat.

Johnny made Coleman sweat, but the agency by which it was accomplished was beyond his wildest dreaming. It happened this way:

AT ABERDEEN there was a four track yard running alongside the main track, and spread out between the river and the main line. East of Aberdeen there was a quarry which had been closed down for a considerable period. There also was a branch line which curved into the south and served an agricultural community where dairying and the raising of fine horses were carried on. The opening of the quarry with a sudden boom in the building business, made it necessary to put on a yard engine at that point.

Johnny saw the notice posted that the Aberdeen yard engine was being restored and the job was open for bids. He did nothing about it, however, until he found himself abruptly bumped off the Clayburne job by the return of a hoghead with more seniority. He promptly put his name in the box.

Now the string attached to Johnny's return to the engine service, while it disqualified him from running an engine on the main line, made no provision against his riding on his pass. He got the Aberdeen job and another engineer piloted the hog assigned to the switcher duty from Clayburne to Aberdeen. Johnny went on the smoker of the local passenger train.

The job worked from eight A. M. to four P. M. The switching was divided between the quarry and the small yard opposite the telegraph office. The engine would pull the quarry tracks, bring the stone loads down into the yard, set the loads on passing freight trains. It would spot the empties for loading. Between times it would take the cars the branch line train brought down in the morning, and switch them, some going east and some going west.

It was a rawhiding job in that it kept the engine on the go and the switchmen had little time to cool their heels. Johnny didn't see much of Gail. He called on her at the telegraph office once or twice, but she had her hands full and they couldn't talk. At least he couldn't. He couldn't tell her what he wanted to say. He looked forward to Sunday. He was going to ask her to take a walk with him on Sunday, and they could talk it out then. He wanted her to know that he wasn't overlooking his hand. He was watching every trick. He was going to get back on the main line

by good behavior, and then he was going to get serious with her. He had it all planned out, just what he was going to say, and exactly how he was going to say it.

He was going to put it this way: "I know I'm no prize, Gail, but maybe if I make the grade, and get back my main line rights, why you'll kinda consider me uh—uh—well——" Well, anyhow, he'd have it right on his tongue when the time came. He'd look right into those deep-set eyes and try not to see the hint of laughter that always lurked there. He'd look right into 'em, and he'd let her have it. He'd convince her he wasn't always making himself look ridiculous. Maybe he did have a sort of silly smile, and freckles, and other physical traits that'd never permit him the dignity of a Clark Gable, but——

IT MIGHT have worked out all right if he'd ever got as far as Sunday with his plans. But along came a rainy Friday, a terribly messed up railroad and Trainmaster Coleman with froth around his mouth.

The branch line train came down at noon that day, three hours late and with all the tonnage it could carry. It brought thirty cars that had to be reswitched and classified. Among the cars was a side-door stock car containing four horses. You could tell they were the kind of horses that brought big money. The only reason they weren't in a palace express car was because the shipper couldn't wait for one to be brought up. He'd sold this stock by telegraph, and the stock car had to do. These horses represented large cash. They were, in fact, insured for ten thousand dollars.

Johnny had to stop to admire the steeds when he pulled them out of the local and shoved them down into track four. That was the alley that ran right alongside the river and terminated on the edge of the mud bank where the river curved. There were three cross ties there to act as a bumper. Johnny shoved the horses down into four and made sure he brought them to a gentle stop. He got off the engine while the switchman was on top setting a binder. He was following out the very letter of the law about using this track, and handling live stock. He was watching his hand at every play. The instructions said you were never to kick cars into track four. That track had a down slope. You shoved cars into it. You didn't give 'em a shove and then cut loose and let 'em roll. You didn't kick 'em.

Johnny looked at the horses and felt sorry for them because they were getting wet. The rain was beating in through the slats. They had blankets on, and halters, but the blankets were getting soaked.

When the brakeman came down off the roof, Johnny went after his other switching. The horses were all alone in four, and Johnny wouldn't use that alley for anything else so when the first westbound fast job came along, he could get the horses out and hang them on the main line shot. He had it all figured out. But he hadn't figured on Mr. Coleman and a highball extra east.

Mr. Coleman and the extra east came to town all crippled up at 3:55 P. M. The extra came in limping because it had broken in two on Savage Hill, and it had been necessary to chain it together because a drawbar was out by the roots. Johnny was just getting ready to go down to the quarry with his engine and tie up for the day when the extra blew on the curve.

Johnny held his spot in the little yard and looked at his watch with a frown. The extra was pretty close onto the time of No. 4, the eastward all-Pullman limited. Johnny frowned and looked around. There certainly wasn't any room in Aberdeen to put the extra away. He didn't understand until he saw the extra slide by the depot and then come to a stop with its train strung out on the main line.

Looking over near the depot, Johnny saw Guy Coleman and gulped. Mr. Coleman was a sight to behold. His hat brim was dripping water, his clothes were sticking to his frame, and his pants and coat showed reddish-brown streaks. You only

get streaks like that from wrestling around with chains in the rain and mud. Johnny saw Mr. Coleman skin down from the top of a box car, shout something to a brakeman who was riding with him, and then come toward Johnny running.

"Got a lung on that Pennsy automobile car," Coleman shouted, pointing. "Sec-

ond car behind it's got a busted brake beam. Gotta set 'em out. When we pull down, you come in on 'em."

JOHNNY understood very plainly. He was going to have to do some fancy switching and the only place he had to do it was on track four where the horses were. He could understand, also, the reason for Mr. Coleman's agitation. This extra was a solid train of perishable and merchandise freight. It moved next to passenger train speed. It was a red-ball shot, and when you delayed it you had a lot of explaining to do. It had been seriously delayed chaining up the cripple. It was being delayed more now setting the cripple out. And worse of all it was right in the face of No. 4, and if it didn't get moving immediately, it would lay No. 4 out. Then there would be some explaining to do. With any sort of break, it could beat No. 4 to the next town east and get in out of the way. Johnny saw it all as Coleman signalled violently to the road engine and the long train parted.

The road engine pulled the forward half down the main to clear the switch into the yard lead track. The road engine went away down to give Johnny plenty of room. Coleman leaped from the cars at the switch and gave Johnny a fancy sign to come ahead.

Johnny pulled out into the main line, and when Coleman got the switch over and gave him the sign, Johnny backed up to the crippled part of the hot shot and coupled on. The break was on the other end of the car he backed into. That's where it was chained to its neighbor.

Coleman ran along three cars, disappeared back of the third and presently gave Johnny the signal to take 'em away. Johnny took 'em away, three of 'em. The third one had a broken brake beam which also had been secured by a chain.

The move would be, then, to set this third car on the yard lead, go back into the main and set off the second which was in good order, and then return to the yard lead with the cripple just behind his engine. The hot shot could immediately couple up and get going.

It was a simple switching move—nothing involved about it. It would put Johnny and his crew on overtime, but who cared? The main thing was to get that fast freight job moving before the passenger train came down on its tail.

Johnny roared down on the switch with his three cars. He saw the bedraggled, and somewhat violent, train master drop off the third car and throw the switch. The train master then gave a sign to come back fast.

Johnny obeyed with a thunder of exhaust, belching smoke high from the stack. He was doing his part in coöperating. He wasn't letting any rust form under his wheels. His fireman was on Johnny's side of the cab, hanging in the gangway and watching Mr. Coleman's antics.

COLEMAN'S arm showed out suddenly between the second and third car, and came down sharply. It was the sign to stop. Johnny again obeyed without delay.

He slammed the air to his driving wheels.

He gasped. He pointed and moved his lips. He ignored the train master's sign to go back to the switch. He could see the big steel box car rolling free into track four. The horses were in four. And nobody was making any move to ride the box car. Coleman was back there waving violently for Johnny to go ahead.

"Great God!" Johnny yelled. "He's kicked it." Johnny didn't give a hoot about the steel box. The horses were first in his thought. The horses and the fact that Guy Coleman had violated the book and the fireman was a witness to it.

Johnny disobeyed Coleman's wild waving. Johnny started back to catch the steel box and hold it from bumping. He was barely aware of Coleman staring at him wide-eyed and then making a grab for the car next to him. Coleman kept waving to stop. Johnny kept backing to catch the steel box. Coleman grabbed the angle cock above the air brake hose and opened it wide. There was just enough air left in it to stop Johnny with great suddenness.

Johnny leaped from the cab and started running.

"The horses," Johnny yelled. He tried to point.

"Get back on that engine," Coleman shouted. "You dam' fool!"

"The horses," Johnny bawled. He was watching the car sail down on them.

Then Coleman stopped him with a firm grip on his arm.

"You get on that engine," Coleman bellowed, "or you'll never get on another engine. I'm runnin' this show!"

Johnny never got out the retort. The crash stopped his speech. He jerked free from Coleman and ran with eyes staring widely. He was conscious that his fireman, his conductor and a couple of switchmen were right along with him.

"She's knocked the hosses loose," a switchman yelled, and Johnny saw what he meant.

The horse car was rolling over the rotten ties at the end of the spur. The horses were toppling into the river.

IV

JOHNNY felt his heart in his throat, the pounding of his pulses in his head, but he goaded his legs to the utmost. It wasn't very far through track four in actual footage. It seemed a million miles. The horses were screaming in fright. The car was settling into the water.

Johnny pulled at the buttons of his jumper. There was one thought uppermost in his mind. He had to get the horses out. They'd blame him. Coleman would say it was his fault. No power on earth could get him back now. They'd make short work of him in the super's cold office. But if he could get the horses out alive—

He flung his jumper from him and was not aware that he was outdistancing the others almost two steps for one. He threw his jumper to one side and never considered that highly jeweled time-piece in its pocket that probably would never run again. He was thinking about those horses, and their frightened screams were tearing at him. He was wishing they'd hush as he dropped his shoulder straps off and fairly ran out of his overalls.

The car was settling into the water gently like a scuttled ship. The horses were swimming, their nostrils distending their eyes wide with fright. Johnny saw all this as he jumped. He forgot to take off his shoes and his cap and goggles. They were all in place. Johnny saw the frantic animals with the water coming closer and closer up to the top of the car, and then he felt the cold bite of the water against his sweating hide.

His shoes were heavy, pulling him down, but he struck out for the car with long strides. He tried to remember that he oughtn't to hurry in the water, that it was bad for you. He could think of nothing except the horses. If he could dive under

and stay there long enough to get a door open, they ought to be able to swim out. That was the idea.

Johnny didn't hear the shouts from the shore. His breath was gone when he grasped a slat on the side of the car near the roof, and he rested a minute. The horses were beating around. The car had a foot to go yet before the roof would be under.

Filling his lungs, Johnny pulled himself down. He didn't have to dive because pulling down along the side slats of the stock car was like going down a ladder. The water burned his eyes, and the pressure filled his ears. He kept telling himself that all this hadn't been his fault. He'd been watching his step, every inch of the way. Ever since he'd got back in an engine cab, he'd been extremely careful. But just try and get Mr. Banks to believe anything like that!

JOHNNY'S cold fingers found the hasp on the side door. His lungs were bursting as he used both hands to fumble with it. He tugged at it frantically, at the same time telling himself he had to keep cool. Then, when it seemed he couldn't stand it any longer, he felt the hasp come open in his hands. He let go and his body shot upward.

Coleman and the fireman and the switchman were on the bank shouting at Johnny when his head bobbed up. He grasped a side slat and spat water from his mouth. He shook his head to get his ears clear. He couldn't hear what they were yelling because the horses were making so much noise, and the water wouldn't come out of his head.

Johnny sucked air. He relaxed for a full half minute, just hanging there with his body floating out from the car. Then he closed his eyes, filled his lungs and went down hand over hand to open that door.

It seemed an endless job before he could get it to budge. He had to come up twice for breath. The third time he felt it give and slide. His heart was pounding viciously as he worked it open. He tugged it back as far as it would go, and then he came up again to see no more than half a foot between the distended nostrils of the fast tiring horses, and the roof of their trap.

He rested only a few second this trip. From now on it would be hard, but he wouldn't have to dive. There was some danger of a lashing foot smashing him. Maybe if he could get one of them started—

Johnny got inside the car. He caught a halter. The horse fought him. He tried talking to it, his voice sounding strangely in his ears against the roof of that car. The water was whirling through the side slats, making a funny roaring noise. Johnny talked to the horse. Little by little he coaxed it his way. It was near the door to begin with. Liberating it was not as hard a fight as he had figured on. He got it through the door. He was dimly aware of it striking desperately for the shore.

He heard a long whistle wail as he was jockeying the second horse out. He took a severe ducking and had one leg scraped by a kicking hoof, but he kept on after the animal and presently, it, too, was free.

Two whistle notes sounded sharply, but Johnny was only dimly aware of them. He had to get out of the way quickly because the third horse got himself out in his mad swimming around. One more to go. The shouting from the shore.

That last horse. It persisted in staying in the forward end. Johnny worked his way around it. If he could just get behind it, or to the side of it, he might have some luck. Three times he had to stop and battle for breath. He felt terriby weary, fearfully tired. There was no more strength in his arms.

WHEN his mouth suddenly dipped full of water, Johny's heart jumped and he looked toward the door. The car

was settling over. It was starting over on the side the door was open. Savagely he let go of the side slat. Savagely he lashed out for the neck of the panic-stricken animal. It was now or never.

It was almost never. Johnny got his arms on the horse's neck. He tried to direct it toward the exit which was not three inches out of the swirl. The horse fought back. Johnny gripped the halter. Then he had hold of a side slat and started to back, pulling and talking gently between gasps.

"All—right—ol'—boy—all right——"

The horse's head ducked suddenly. Johnny went under with it. A foreleg struck him, numbing his right leg. He clung with both arms around the animal's neck. His first thought was that the car had turned over on them. And then he opened his eyes and he was out in free water. And so was the horse. He was out in free water trying to breathe but finding it impossible. He had no strength. He still clung to the horse. He kicked his feet. He got them over the horse's back. He knew that.

The shouting sounded nearer now. His eyes were glassy, but he could see people. If he could only breathe! He fought grimly to cling to consciousness.

Suddenly the motion under him changed from the pulsing of a swimming body. The horse was trembling. Water was running off it. People were all around him. A man said, "Here, give a hand!"

A loud voice bawled as from a great distance:

"My Lord! Who's that riding horseback in his underwear?"

That's when Johnny caved in.

V

THE general manager said, "You all right, Westcott?"

Johnny wasn't, but he grinned. They'd pumped a barrel of water out of him. He lay in most of it there in the Aberdeen depot telegraph office.

Johnny said, "Kinda weak." He saw the general manager and wondered where he'd come from. Then he saw Gail Trevor, and she was smiling through tears, on her knees beside him.

The general manager said, "Good thing I was on No. 4. Wouldn't've missed that show of courage for the world. Only saw the end, at that. But from what the boys, and Miss Trevor here say—well, there oughtta be medals for guys like you."

Then Johnny clouded up and wanted to cry himself. He gulped, "It—it wasn't all my fault this time. I——"

"Don't worry about fault," the general manager said. "I've had a talk with Coleman. Somebody's been handing you the dirty end of things. Somebody slipped this time where he couldn't hand you anything."

"I been watching my step," Johnny said. "This yard business. Well, it's the main line——"

"It's main line stuff you've got, fellow," the general manager snapped. "And if getting the main line back is all you want ——"

Johnny looked at the G. M., and then he looked at Gail. The G. M. looked at them both and decided he ought to be seeing about getting a passenger train on its way.

Gail leaned over and kissed Johnny once, very quickly. Johnny held on and grinned.

The G. M. turned at the door. He said, "Somebody better get him some dry underwear and get him looking respectable while he's on company property."

Gail knelt and pulled her rain coat closer over his soaked form.

Gail said, "All right, Johnny?"

Johnny kissed her. He was all right.

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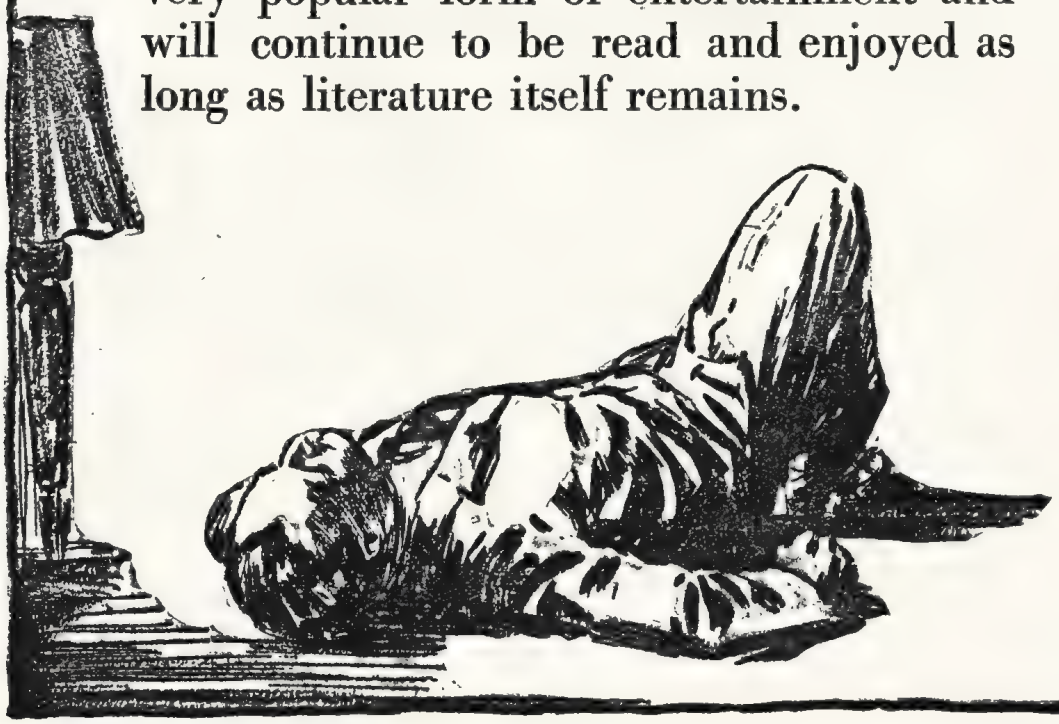

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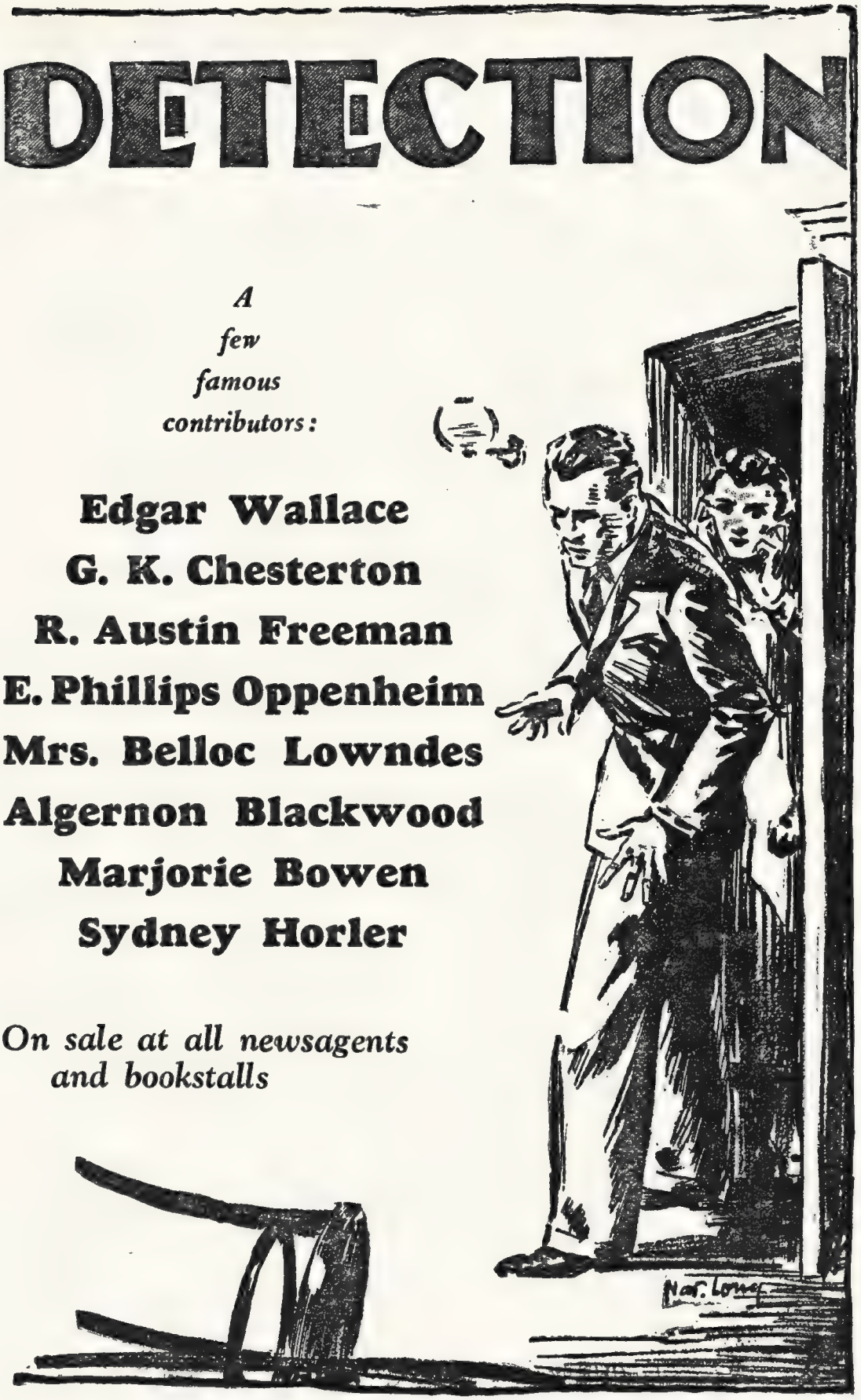

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